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The
Sinfulness
of
Little Sin

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The
Sinfulness of Little Sins.

BY
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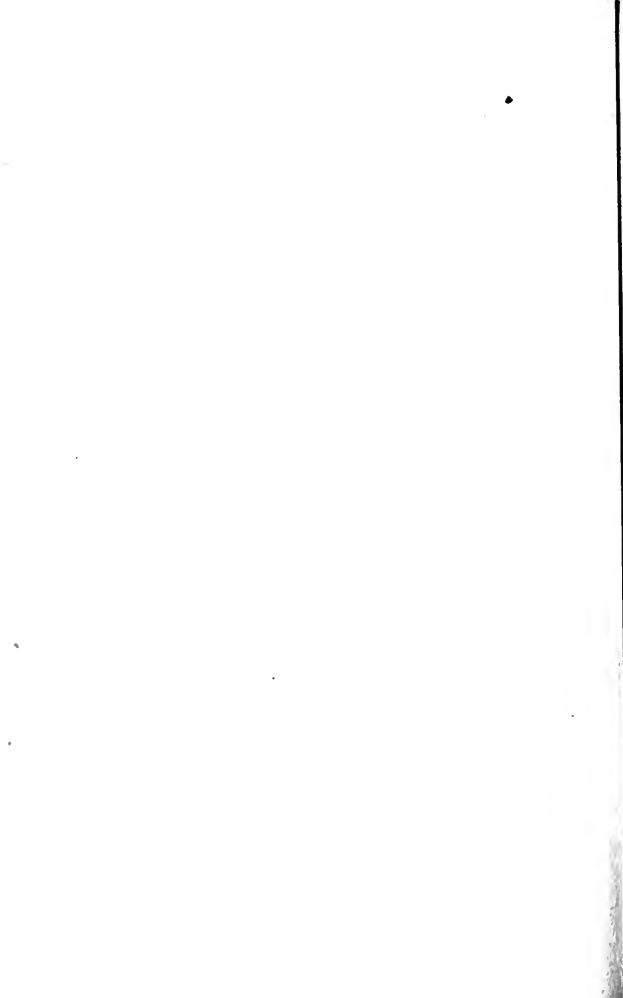
Fifteenth Edition.

LONDON:
William Skeffington, 163, Piccadilly.
1863.



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THE EXCEEDING SINFULNESS OF SIN.

ROMANS, vii., 13.

Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid! But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.

K*NOW thyself,*” said the wise man of Greece, “*know thyself,*” is a maxim which came down from heaven.” And, undoubtedly, self-knowledge is one of the great wants of fallen man. We do not know ourselves. We have inherited not only a corrupt will, but a darkened understanding; and though we may have sufficient light imperfectly to distinguish the broad contrast between right and wrong, we are unable to detect the finer lines of demarcation even in others; and in ourselves are so blinded by the

prejudices and interests of self, that we habitually "call evil good and good evil, put darkness for light and light for darkness, bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter."* Nor is this ignorance removed by our intercourse with one another; to a certain extent it is perpetuated. Men observe each other's actions and principles; and taking the general character of each which they find prevailing around them, erect it into a standard of morals to which they conform, and by which they try their own lives. Hence, the opinion of the world, the law of honour, the conventional usages of society, become tests by which men learn to judge of right and wrong,—crooked rules, which, false in themselves, can but mislead those who apply them to the decision of their conduct. Thus error is perpetuated; and man, left to himself, would form, and has formed, systems of morality in which vices are strangely blended with virtues, and the whole is put in action by a set of motives which themselves are sins.

But if we do not naturally know the true distinctions between right and wrong, still less can we properly estimate the due obligations to

* Isaiah, v., 20.

the one or the real guilt of the other. They depend, indeed, on considerations which are beyond our reach, and can be rendered perceptible only by the same light which shows us our relations to God. Hence the necessity of revelation to teach us the nature of sin and our own sinfulness. We need a standard of goodness furnished from the Source of all goodness Himself, that we may be able to measure our own deficiencies; and we need to be informed of what we owe to God, that our consciences may be awakened to a more adequate sense of our guilt. Now such a standard is the law given by God under the old covenant. Its object was, and is, to teach men their duty, and to convince them of sin; and as such it is exhibited to us in the text.

St. Paul had been arguing that the law, to which the Jews trusted, could not be the instrument of justification, or of presenting men righteous and acceptable to God, because its condition, which was perfect obedience, had never been fulfilled by any. On the contrary, being broken, it was the occasion of sin and condemnation; and man, if justified at all, must be justified on the terms of the Gospel covenant,

by the free mercy of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. But the question occurs, If the law, being given and broken, became the occasion of sin, what are we to think of the law? "What shall we say then? is the law sin? God forbid! Nay, I had not known sin," replies the Apostle, speaking in the person of corrupt human nature; I should not, on account of my ignorance, have known the real nature of sin, "but by the law: for," to take an instance, "I had not known lust," I should not have known coveting to be a sin, "except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.* But sin, taking occasion by the commandment," seizing the opportunity, as it were, of this direct command of God, tempted me to break it, and "wrought in me all manner of concupiscence;" and thus led me into disobedience, which it could not have done if there had been no commandment to disobey: "for without the law sin is dead." Where there is no law pointing out what should be done, and denouncing what should not be done, there is no opportunity or room for sin. "For I was alive without the law once:" you may suppose a time when there was no law; there could, conse-

* Rom., vii., 7.

quently, be no disobedience, and I should so far be living uncondemned: "but when the commandment came, sin revived:" I disobeyed it, "and I died,"—fell under condemnation. "And the commandment which was ordained to life," the statutes and judgments of which God had said, "If a man do them he shall live in them,"* "I found," on account of my disobedience, "to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me," persuaded me to break it, much as Satan did Eve, "and by it slew me," brought me under the condemnation of all sin,—death. "Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me?" was this holy law the real cause of my death? "God forbid! But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good." It was not the law, it was sin which was the cause; so that sin became manifest, working death in me by that law which is itself so good; "that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful;" so that sin, by causing me to break so holy a

* Lev., xviii., 5.

commandment, appeared in all the enormity of its real sinfulness.

It is evident, then, that one of the purposes of the law was to teach us the real nature of sin, and to convince us of our sinfulness ; and a purpose it was, full of mercy as well as of wisdom, and an essential part of that office of the law which consists in preparing and fitting men to receive the Gospel. For a conviction of the real nature of sin, and of its exceeding sinfulness, is necessary, in the first place, to that sincere repentance which is the first requisite for admission into the new covenant. If we do not know the greatness of our guilt, we cannot sorrow for it as we ought ; and if we are ignorant of the malignity of sin, we shall not renounce it with sufficient earnestness, nor guard against it with sufficient caution. Such knowledge, then, is one of the first elements of real repentance. But again ; an acquaintance with the true character of sin is necessary to make us humble and to destroy all self-dependence. Humility is the very door of the Gospel. “ Except ye be converted and become as little children,” as humble, that is, and as simple, “ ye shall not enter into

the kingdom of heaven.”* But that which most effectually breaks down the self-satisfied spirit, with which we love to appear before God as well as before men,—that which prostrates us in the very dust before the throne of infinite holiness, is a due sense of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. It is the only real self-knowledge. It exhibits us to ourselves as we are. It tears off the mask which our natural pride and the world’s principles had combined to hold before our moral deformities ; and teaches those who, like the church of Laodicea, believed that they were “rich, and increased with goods, and had need of nothing,” that they are “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked ;”† and thus it ministers to true humility. And, lastly, a knowledge of the sinfulness of sin tends to bring us to Christ. “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick ;”‡ and in proportion to our belief in the malignancy of the disease, will be the earnestness and perseverance with which we shall seek a cure. To feel our sinfulness and helplessness is to learn to value the blessings of redemption. It is when the heart

* Matt., xviii., 3. † Rev., iii., 17.

‡ Matt., ix., 12.

becomes acquainted with its own depravity that man seriously inquires, "What shall I do to be saved ;" and as long as we are deeply sensible of our guilt and danger, we may well turn away from the allurements of the world and the flesh, with the Apostle's declaration, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life."* The law was, indeed, in many respects, as "a schoolmaster to bring men to Christ ;"† but in none more so than as it convinced them of the deep corruption of their moral nature, by holding up to their view a transcript of God's perfect holiness ; and as it contrasted their lives with the commandments, which are holy, and just, and good, that "sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful."

It is evident, then, from these considerations, as well as from the purpose which, we learn from the text, the law was intended to serve, that it is both our interest and duty to form as correct an estimate as we can of the real enormity of sin. It is our duty, because it is to follow out God's own purpose ; it is our interest, because it tends to quicken our repentance, to deepen our humility, and to bring us to Christ and keep us there,

* John, vi., 68.

† Gal., iii., 24.

by the exercise of a lively and self-renouncing faith. May it please Almighty God to make such the fruits of our present meditations on this important subject,—a subject, I need not add, perfectly in harmony with the humiliation, the penitence, the godly sorrow, which ought to possess our hearts at the season of Lent.

Our present purpose, as introductory to the subject of the following discourses, is so to look at sin as to perceive more distinctly than, perhaps, we mostly do, its exceeding sinfulness. And by sin we are to understand disobedience to God's commands, either given in the dictates of our conscience, or revealed far more fully and accurately in His Holy Word.

I. Now the very lowest view we can take, shows us sin in a very awful light, as self-destruction,—the troubler of our peace here, and the ruin of our eternal happiness hereafter. It is a truth which appearances seem to contradict, but which is fully borne out by fact, that there is little real peace enjoyed by those who make their own wills, not God's law, the rule of their lives. There may be prosperity, there may be mirth, there may be much which the world envies; but within is the tyranny of the passions, who are

hard taskmasters, a secret dissatisfaction with self and a soreness of conscience, and an often-recurring dread of something to come hereafter, to which men may close their eyes, but which will float before them still. And when sorrow and suffering are their lot, as at some time or other in this life they must be, they are exposed to all their bitterness, without any sufficient consolation, or any solid ground of confidence and hope. "The wicked," it is written, "are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked."*

But this is a very small part of the destructive effects of sin. It is the ruin of the soul's life,—that eternal life of happiness inexpressible which has been purchased for us by the merits and passion of Jesus Christ. "The wages of sin is death."† "The soul that sinneth, it shall die."‡ "Then shall the Judge say unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."§ They who, for Christ's sake, might have dwelt amid the glories of the presence of

* Isa., lvii., 20, 21.

† Rom., vi., 23.

‡ Ezek., xviii., 4.

§ Matt., xxv., 41.

God in still increasing holiness and happiness for ever, will, for sin's sake, be driven out to live in eternal torment and the company of the wretched. And to this horrible state every sin brings us nearer, and every unrepented sin will condemn us. Sin is, therefore, in the most fearful sense, self-destruction: it is the soul's suicide: and, viewed in this light, from the tremendous nature of its consequences, must be inferred to be "exceeding sinful."

2. But our business at present is rather with its moral nature than with its consequences; and therefore, we may observe, secondly, that sin is opposition to our Creator. It is a principle to which every mind at once readily gives its assent, that the Maker of all things has a right to the service of the things which He has made. And in general He receives it. Animate and inanimate nature alike perform their allotted duties. Bird, beast, and fish, herbs and trees, earth, air, and ocean, the orbs of heaven wheeling in their assigned orbits, all do Him homage by their regularity and uniform obedience to His laws. But man, the last best work of the Creator's hand, mars the order and harmony of the universe. His sin crosses and contradicts his

Maker's will. Formed to adore, to obey, to glorify Him, he treats Him with neglect, disobedience, and dishonour. He has defaced God's image, and though made "upright," has "sought out many inventions"* of iniquity. This has sin done : and on this ground alone, as opposition to our Creator, might be pronounced "exceeding sinful."

3. But, thirdly, it must be regarded as rebellion against our lawful king. The sovereignty of all things is undeniably God's. "The Lord most high is terrible ; He is a great King over all the earth."† "I am a great King, saith the Lord of hosts and my name is dreadful among the heathen."‡ Independently, then, of the claims of our mediatorial King, Christ, the Lord of glory, we are bound to honour and obey God as King of the whole earth. His laws should be the rule of our conduct ; His will the object of our efforts. His enemies should be our enemies ; and it should be our glory to promote His. I need hardly add, that it is not so. We forget His laws, or wilfully disobey them. We dishonour His name with our lips or in our lives. For some poor pleasure we sell ourselves to His

* Eccles., vii., 29. † Ps. xlvii., 2. ‡ Mal., i., 14.

enemies ; and either quit His service for theirs altogether, or vainly attempt to reconcile them both. If we do not profess in words, we at least declare in practice, that we will not have Him to reign over us. Rebellion and treason are among the foulest crimes which stain the catalogue of man's injuries to man ; yet rebels and traitors has sin made us against our heavenly King, the Lord our God.

4. But there are fouler crimes than these : and none, perhaps, is so justly branded by the universal voice of reprobation as ingratitude. Yet we must confess, that sin is ingratitude against God—and ingratitude, too, of the most aggravated kind ; for He is our Benefactor, our Father, and our Redeemer.

God is our Benefactor. Even the most unhappy must admit, that, notwithstanding the many ills which our sinfulness has brought upon us, this life has many blessings and enjoyments. All these are God's free and undeserved gifts :—our life itself, our preservation from the dangers to which our frail frame is every instant exposed ; every interval of health, every hour of liberty and free enjoyment ; and our senses, with their varied pleasures,—the mirror of the eye imaging

to the soul itself the hues and forms of nature's inexhaustible beauty; the ear vibrating to the chords of harmony, collecting and pouring on the brain the words of wisdom or the voice of love; the tongue, the mind's interpreter, conveying to others the sentiments and feelings of our own breasts, and knitting in a common bond of fellowship those who would otherwise be isolated wanderers in a dreary world; and even the inferior senses, so fitted to external things and external things to them, that they bear their part in contributing to our security and delight. Add to these the gift of intellect, of terrestrial beings man's peculiar heritage; memory, which collects and retains; imagination, which combines and embellishes; judgment, which distinguishes, classifies, and corrects; and reason, which from materials thus prepared draws new conclusions, elicits new truths, and carries the whole mind on in the career of knowledge. Nor must we forget the affections so abused, alas! and unworthily exerted, but formed to be the sources of our best and holiest happiness;—the pleasures of loving and being loved, of pitying and doing good, of glowing with admiration, of sympathising with joy or grief; the silken bonds of kindred and

affections, the tranquil enjoyments of home, and, above all,—that noblest employment of a created being,—the rising to the love of God, the resting all our hopes, and aims, and self, on Him, the adoring contemplation of His attributes and Himself. I will not stay to add our many obligations to God's watchful providence, to His ever-present hand, shielding our march and directing our paths, ever and anon leading us to good by most unlikely ways, and calling a blessing out of the darkest shades of affliction and disappointment. I will at once ask, Whether sin, which is disobedience to such a Benefactor,—whether ingratitude so base, so aggravated, so unprovoked,—whether to requite infinite mercies with offences all but innumerable, be not indeed “exceeding sinful?”

5. But we must go further still: *filial* ingratitude is dyed with a yet deeper stain of guilt. And God is our Father, as well as our Benefactor. By creation, indeed, He had purchased Himself that title; and on that ground He expostulates with His disobedient children, “If then I be a father, where is mine honour?”* But His claims on us arise from a nearer and

* Mal., i., 6.

more exalted relationship. Born in sin and children of God's wrath, with no more title to His compassion than those vast multitudes who are still left aliens from Him and without God in the world, we have been adopted into His family for the merits of Jesus Christ, by the Spirit of grace, and in the sacrament of baptism. To us is the promise made and the covenant sealed, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."* These are privileges which should be ever present with us, brethren. We should bind them for a sign upon our hand, and they should be as frontlets between our eyes. For we may forfeit them indeed by negligence and sin; we may sell our birthright, and lose the blessing: but we have received the title of the adoption, and have been enrolled among the children of God; and we cannot disobey God without disobeying a Father. Every offence against Him is an act of filial ingratitude; and the freeness of His paternal love infinitely aggravates the sinfulness of sin.

* 2 Cor., vi., 17, 18.

6. But God, as a Benefactor, stands in a relation towards us which has no parallel with anything of earth. Our parents here were the authors of our first birth, but could not free us from the corrupt nature we inherited from them, nor deliver us from its consequences, sin and eternal death. Our own actions but add to our guilt and our danger. But God is our Redeemer, as well as our Father. In our lost estate, although that lost estate was but the just penalty of sin against Him, His mercy visited us. His wisdom devised a wonderful plan, which His love more wonderfully executed, to vindicate His justice while He pardoned the sinner. "Sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh."* The eternal Son of God "was made flesh, and dwelt among us," bore all the infirmities and more than the afflictions of our nature, was rejected and persecuted by those He came to save, and by their hands was nailed to the cross, on which He made a full and sufficient atonement for the sins of the whole world. His death was our life. Through Him God offers pardon, reconciliation, sonship, yea, the glories and happiness of heaven,

* Rom., viii., 3.

to all who in sincere repentance and lively faith will turn to Him. And pitying our weakness as well as our danger, He offers to all who seek it heartily the aid of the Holy Spirit to convert, renew, sanctify, strengthen, and direct them; to enable them to live as those must who have taken up the cross of Jesus Christ; and who, having the hope in them of being like their Lord when He shall appear, would purify themselves even as He is pure.* This is the Being, my brethren, against whom our sins are committed. This thrice-merciful Redeemer, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, is He of whom we think so little, and whom we, perhaps habitually, disobey. He who died for us, and lives to bless us with His own divine grace, is He to whose service we prefer that of self, the world, nay, even of the devil. Surely the sin of those who have been thus redeemed must be exceeding sinful! Surely it can be no light thing—no ordinary guilt—to rebel ungratefully against our reconciled Father; to crucify, as it were, the Son of God afresh: to grieve, if not to quench, the Holy Spirit!

7. Once more, my brethren, let us change

* 1 John, iii., 3.

our ground, and view our sins in the odious light of perjury. We have promised solemnly to God, and before the Church we have confirmed the vow, that we renounce the devil, the world, and the flesh, and that we would not only steadfastly believe God's revelations to us, but keep His holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of our life. Every sin, therefore, is a breach of this solemn promise—a promise rendered still more sacred by being made when God in His mercy took us into covenant with Him, and sealed His grace to us with the waters of baptism. Every yielding to Satan, the world, and our selfish passions, is in the face of a vow which is registered on high: every instance of neglect of God's revealed will involves the guilt of faithlessness and falsehood. Thus, too, then, as the breach of our baptismal promise, does sin become “exceeding sinful.”

And, now, let us collect the sum of what has been said. It is this: that every wilful sin we commit, as it is destructive to our own souls, is also disobedience to our Creator, rebellion against our King, aggravated ingratitude towards our Benefactor, our Father, our thrice-merciful Redeemer, and perjury in the sight of Him, whose

vows are upon us. And now, dear brethren, go and apply this awful truth to the sins of this day, of the last week, the last year; and then throw your memory back over the accumulated transgressions of your past lives. Do not shrink from the sad, the humiliating prospect. It is well to know ourselves, though the first-fruits of our knowledge be, as with our first parents, fear and shame. Gaze on your own deformity, till shame begets humility, and sorrow becomes repentance. Confess before God your utter worthlessness, and from the dust of self-abasement beseech Him to absolve you from your sins, and to raise you by His power to newness of life. Beseech Him earnestly, but beseech Him in faith. Let not the keen sense of your unworthiness tempt you to doubt His will to save you. He would have all men to be saved. He, in whose sight the heavens are not clean, knows far better than we can do the hatefulness and deformity of sin; yet it was to save sinners that he gave His only-begotten Son, whose blood cleanseth from all sin, and who is the propitiation for our sins. Our transgressions are innumerable, but His merits are infinite; and “where sin has abounded,

grace did much more abound.”* Look trustingly, then, but humbly, for pardon to the cross of Christ; and seek through Him the aid and guidance of the Holy Spirit. And let your conviction of sin’s exceeding sinfulness work in you, not holy resolutions merely, but greater watchfulness and stricter self-control, more fervent prayer, and more diligent employment of the means of grace. Above all, let it teach you perpetual distrust of self, and simple, confiding reliance on the grace of God. Then only are we strong when we are weak; then only safe when we are fearful of ourselves; then only advancing in holiness, when we are deeply conscious of our own exceeding sinfulness.

* Rom., v., 20.

SINS OF THE TEMPER.

TITUS, iii., 2.

Gentle, showing all meekness unto all men.

A KNOWLEDGE of sin, which is the first element of true repentance, may be said to comprise two requisites; a knowledge of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and a knowledge of what actions, thoughts, and principles are sinful. On both these points conscience is apt to require instruction. Many who take far too low a view of the heinousness of sin, can never mourn for it as deeply, nor guard against it as anxiously, as it deserves. And many, observing only the broad lines of morality and the more obvious of God's commandments, from carelessness and habit remain ignorant of many parts of their bounden duty, and live without alarm or

uneasiness in the habitual commission of what they ought to know to be sins. My last discourse had reference to the former of these points. I endeavoured to show you that sin is exceeding sinful, not only because it is the destruction of our happiness in this life and the next, but because it is disobedience to our Creator, rebellion against our King, aggravated ingratitude to our Benefactor, our Father, our thrice-merciful Redeemer, and the faithless breach of our solemn and repeated vows to God. We may now proceed to the second point, and consider some classes of sins which, dangerous though they are, may be most likely to escape detection. Our object will be to throw the light of Scripture into our own breasts, to discover what may be lurking there which God forbids and condemns, in order that by His grace it may be cast out and crucified. We know not, it may be, half the idol forms which are portrayed within, in the soul's chambers of imagery; and we may require to be led there, as was the prophet in his vision,* to learn our sinfulness, to mourn for, and forsake it. But in order to receive any practical advantage from the

* Ezek., viii.

subject before us, it will be necessary to accompany our meditations with strict and candid self-examination, and with fervent prayer to Almighty God for the illumination, direction, and strength of the Holy Spirit. May He mercifully vouchsafe us His blessing, for our Lord Jesus Christ's sake!

I do not propose to dwell on those sins which are of so obvious a nature that they almost preclude the possibility of ignorance. The adulterer, the swearer, the drunkard, the unchaste, the fraudulent, the sabbath-breaker, and the like, know well enough that they are sinning. They have learnt it from the unwelcome voice within, which they have been endeavouring with various success to silence or escape. They do not need to be told what their sin is. To them we can but point, on the one hand, to the mercy and forbearance of God, which has so long been calling them to repentance, and to the cross of Christ, where pardon may yet be sought and found; and on the other, to "the wrath of God revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men,"* to the terror of His threatenings, to the uplifted hand

* Rom., i., 18.

of death, to the throne of judgment, and “the blackness of darkness for ever,” reserved for the unrepentant, together with the devil and his angels. We can remind them of the solemn words of inspiration : “ Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these : adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such-like ; of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”* Not to inherit the kingdom of God is to be lost for ever.

I wish rather to direct your attention to those sins, which, being little thought of by the world, and less obtrusive in their own character, are more likely to escape our observation, and to be poisoning our soul’s life, while we are scarcely conscious of their existence. Of this nature, in a greater or less degree, are sins of the temper, sins of pride and vanity, sins of the thoughts, sins of the tongue, and sins of omission. Rarely amenable to the laws of human tribunals, seldom

* Gal., v., 19—21.

judged of severely in the code of worldly morality, they have not the brand of sin so clearly stamped upon them as to startle us into watchfulness. They are stealthy foes. They master us before they alarm us, and often become habitual before we feel the chain they have been winding round us. Hence we require to be put on our guard against them, and to learn to detect them by the touch of the unerring word of God.

We have to consider at present the sins of the temper; by which I mean not hatred, malice, and revenge, which belong to the class of obvious and self-condemning sins, but anger, fretfulness, and discontent, moroseness and incivility, and a petulant and unforgiving spirit; sins which, it must be admitted, are found not in the irreligious only, the careless, and the worldly, but also in those who have the appearance and some of the reality of better principles and more Christian lives. And yet are such tempers undeniably opposed to the requirements and spirit of the Gospel. Meekness, gentleness, patience, a mild and forgiving disposition, are constituent features of that charity, or Christian love, without which, we are told, the most

brilliant gifts, the most accurate knowledge, the most unshrinking constancy, the most extensive beneficence, are nothing.* And they are bound upon us at once by the commands of God, the example of our Saviour, and the terms of the Christian covenant. Of the commands of God we have one instance among many in the words of the text. It was St. Paul's inspired injunction to Titus, whom he had left in Crete to govern the church there, and to teach the converts their duty both to God and man: "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, to speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, showing all meekness to all men."† Our Lord's words are very remarkable and awful. It was just after pronouncing a blessing on the meek and the peacemakers that He said, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill: and, Whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment. But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in

* 1 Cor., xiii., 1—3.

† Tit., iii., 1, 2.

danger of the council : but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell-fire :”* words which, however they are explained, indicate a high degree of danger and guilt in the indulgence of anger, as well as of uncharitableness and hatred. Again, the Jewish teachers, making an unwarrantable inference from God’s threatenings by His prophet Amos, “For three transgressions of Moab [or Judah, or Israel], and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof,”† had decided that the sum of these two numbers, seven, was the limit of man’s duty in forgiving others ; and that after this, revenge might have its will. Simon Peter inquired of our Lord whether this interpretation was correct. The reply is well known : “I say not unto you until seven times, but until seventy times seven.”‡ There is no limit to the duty of Christian forgiveness. How, indeed, can there be, when it is our Saviour’s express command, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you ?”§ And in accordance with this

* Matt., v., 21, 22.

† Amos, i., 2.

‡ Matt., xviii., 22.

§ Matt., v., 44.

teaching are the inspired directions of His Apostles: "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil-speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: and be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."* "The servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men."† "Let your moderation be known unto all men."‡ Such passages might easily be multiplied. But enough has been said to show us, that God's commands require from us an abstinence from anger, impatience, moroseness, and an unforgiving spirit; and the exercise of the opposite graces: in a word, a due regulation of the temper.

But our Lord taught by practice as well as by precept. He not only "suffered for us," but left us "an example that we should follow His steps."§ And what an example! He was "meek and lowly of heart." Gentle He was to all, kind, compassionate, and forgiving. To the rich and the poor He was courteous; to the ignorant and the learned alike. Publicans sought

* Eph., iv., 31, 32.

† 2 Tim., ii., 24.

‡ Philip., iv., 5.

§ 1 Pet., ii., 21.

Him, and He ate with them; infants were brought to Him, and he blessed them. His anger was only against sin; He was ever merciful to the sinner. Opposition, persecution, insults, could not ruffle His calm and kindly spirit. "When He was reviled, He reviled not again; when He suffered He threatened not."* He pitied his enemies, and wept over them: and even whilst they nailed Him to the cross, breathed out for them amidst his His agony that godlike prayer, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."† "Let this mind be in you," said the Apostle, "which was also in Christ Jesus."‡

Lastly, besides the commands of God and the example of our Saviour, we are bound to the exercise of meekness, forbearance, and forgiveness, by the very terms of the Christian covenant. The Gospel is a dispensation of grace. It deals with us as with helpless sinners, who, having no merits of our own, must be pardoned only by the sovereign grace of God through Jesus Christ. He has a right then to make the condition, and it is one agreeable even to our imperfect sense of

* 2 Pet., ii., 23.

† Luke, xxiii., 34.

‡ Philip., ii., 5.

justice, that we must forgive, if we would be forgiven. This is a truth which our Lord inculcates perhaps oftener than any other. He repeats it again and again. He illustrates it by the parable of the lord and his two servants, where the vast disproportion of our offences against one another to the exceeding guilt of our sins against God, is expressed by representing the one by an hundred pence, the other by the enormous sum of ten thousand talents.* And He has bound it upon us, and obliged us, as it were, to pass sentence on ourselves if we neglect it, by inserting in the prayer which He has taught us, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us." And thus, too, God is angry with those who are angry with others; He judges those who judge others; while the meek and peaceable inherit a blessing, and the merciful shall find mercy. We cannot, indeed, too carefully bear in mind, as one of the conditions of the Christian covenant: "With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured unto you again."†

Having thus placed the duty of restraining and regulating the temper on the basis of Scripture,

* Matt., xviii, 23, &c.

† Matt., vii., 2.

we may proceed to consider some of the sins into which it is most apt to betray us.

And, first, anger. This passion, which appears to have been implanted in us for the purpose of repelling injuries from without, and, in some degree, of punishing injustice in others, is subject, as we all know, to violent irregularities. I am not now, however, to speak of its extreme degrees, which all will admit to be sin, and which can hardly, one would think, be admitted by any who have even the smallest share of Christian principle. That anger, which is a short madness, should not even be named among Christians. But, even in its lesser degrees, we are often carried by it into sin, by indulging it both more than we ought, and when we ought not. It would, perhaps, be going beyond Scripture and the capabilities of our nature to assert that anger is never justifiable. It was no unbecoming passion in Moses, when "he cast the tables out of his hands and brake them," and "ground to powder" the idol of the Israelites;* and it is once narrated of our Lord, that "He looked round about" on His hearers "with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts."† There may be a

* Exod., xxxii.

† Mark, iii., 5.

holy anger when God's honour or the interests of His religion are attacked, and there are occasions and provocations which must necessarily rouse the anger even of the meekest, and which bring, therefore, to a certain extent, their own excuse. But the fault is, that we are too angry, and angry too long. We do not attempt instantly to check the roused passion, and to restrain its force. We do not shorten its career by consideration, by the power of an earnest prayer, and by the firmness of self-control. We rather encourage it by dwelling on the circumstances which excited it, and, perhaps, aggravating them in the remembrance. Thus the mind is poisoned. We are out of charity with our neighbour, and, therefore, not at peace with God. Anger has betrayed us into sin. Your own consciences will supply you with instances, my brethren. The rule of Scripture is simple, "Be ye angry and sin not; let not the sun go down upon your wrath."* Moderate anger as soon as it arises, that it may not grow into sin; and, at any rate, do not lie down to rest till you have calmed and cleansed your bosom. If you are angry, you cannot pray: if you sleep in anger, you sleep in

* Eph., iv., 26.

danger ; your waking may be in another world, where you will be judged, even as you have judged.

But by far the largest number of sins of anger arise from being angry when we ought not. How easily are we provoked by slight offences, fancied neglects, and the trifling inadvertencies of others ! How soon is the mind thrown off its balance, and the smooth surface of charity ruffled, by every little thing that thwarts our inclinations, or even goes contrary to our expectations ! And, what is most to be considered, we are apt to regard these ebullitions of temper, not as sins, but as trifling foibles scarce worth the remembering. My dear brethren, these foibles, as we think them, unhinge the frame of our religion, grieve the Holy Spirit, and, as they are carefully observed by others, dishonour our profession and God. Repeated and indulged, they add to the strength of passion, and nourish anger into a powerful habit. They weaken our self-control, and thus lay us open to the attacks of other, and, perhaps, deadlier sins. They form links, small, perhaps, singly, but strong when knit together, of that chain of little sins with which Satan delights to bind unsuspecting souls. They need

to be watched against, striven against, prayed against, and confessed before God in penitence and supplications for forgiveness.

Other effects of ill-regulated temper are sins of impatience and fretfulness : and these as exhibited either against God or against man. In the former case it may, perhaps, be considered the greater sin ; for even human reason admits the propriety of a created being submitting without murmuring to the will of his Creator ; and the Gospel places patience and cheerful resignation among the very first requisites of the Christian character. Yet even here let us ask ourselves, whether we have never repined at the lot assigned us, murmured at the dispensations of God's providence, or, at the best, submitted with a sullen, ungracious acquiescence to what we found we had not the power to escape ? How unlike is this to what should be the conduct of those who believe that their merciful God will make everything work together for good to them who love Him, and who feel, that by a double title, by creation and by the purchase of Christ's blood, they are altogether, soul and body, His !

But men are generally somewhat more on their guard against fretfulness and impatience

towards God, than against giving way to those feelings towards their fellow-creatures. Of this, indeed, they think little, and scarcely consider it a sin. They suffer themselves to be vexed and ruffled by trifling occurrences and trivial mistakes. They feel peevish and discontented, and indulge the feeling, instead of resolutely shaking it off. In this mood they perversely oppose the wishes and hurt the feelings of others, for the most trifling causes, or for no cause at all. They are vexed and unhappy themselves, and do their utmost to make those about them so too. My brethren, this is not to be "gentle, showing all meekness to all men." This is not "charity," which "suffereth long and is kind." This is not to walk in the steps of our meek and merciful Redeemer, or even to "do unto others as we would they should do unto us." Believe it, these little trials of temper (unimportant as many think them) are part of our daily probation. Their effects may last throughout eternity. In overcoming them by watchfulness and the grace of God lies our duty, our safety, and our happiness. To yield to them is to strengthen the power of sin, to recede further from the example of

Him, to be like whom will be heaven, and to increase our guilt and condemnation.

And here we may observe, that harshness, moroseness, and incivility, are inconsistent with our duty and profession, even when they proceed not from ill-will, but from habit. Such ought never to be the habit of a Christian. Courtesy is the outward expression of charity; and though courtesy may exist where charity is not, yet charity should ever show itself in kindness, meekness, and gentleness, to all men. We are to "let our light so shine before men that they may see our good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven:"* but who will believe that the tree is planted in love, when harshness, moroseness, and incivility, are the visible and forbidden fruits?

Forgiveness of injuries we have already seen to be so necessary a Christian duty, that it is even made a condition, without which we may not hope that our sins will be forgiven. Indeed, Scripture is so explicit on this point, that all who have any real sense of religion must forgive, or conscience will destroy their peace. But it is to be feared, that in practice we often put a

* Matt., v., 16.

fallacy on ourselves, and require to be reminded that the warning runs thus: "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye *from your hearts* forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."* Obligated to confess the necessity of forgiveness, we pass in our minds a kind of sentence of absolution on our offending brother; we profess to others to have forgiven him; we, perhaps, even go so far as to pray for him. But how do we behave to him? Do we really reinstate him in the place he held, and treat him as before the offence was given? Or do we, either because enmity is still really lurking in our bosoms, or (what is nearly as bad) because we are ashamed to make advances of reconciliation, remain as estranged from him as ever? My brethren, this is to trifle with God's commands, and to still our consciences with a practical falsehood. As we must love, so must we forgive, "not in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth."† We should be as ready (perhaps even more ready) to serve those we profess to have forgiven, as those with whom we have never been offended. We should carefully mortify all disposition to be pleased at

* Matt., xviii., 35.

† 1 John, iii., 18

their misfortunes, or uneasy at their success. We should dwell on all the good points of their character till we learn to love them, instead of clinging to the remembrance of what they have done amiss. And we should seek to the utmost of our power an open and cordial reconciliation, that the broken bands of charity may again be knit together in the sight of God and man, and that we may in reality dwell together in unity. Should we succeed, we have gained our brother. Should he reject our advances, we have at least delivered our own soul.

One or two brief remarks in conclusion. Of all whom I am addressing, it is no breach of charity to say, that there is not one who has not been guilty, in a greater degree or less, of some of the sins of temper we have been considering: though many, perhaps, are accustomed to think very lightly of them. But consider, dear brethren, whether that can be of little importance which is contrary to God's commandments, opposed to the example of our Divine Redeemer, and inconsistent with the terms of the Christian covenant. No: it is sin. And sin, all sin, is the destruction of our souls, disobedience to our Creator, rebellion against our

King, ingratitude to our Benefactor, Father, Redeemer, and the breach of our solemn baptismal vow. Search out then these dangerous foes, and drag them into light. Examine your tempers, and prove them by the word of God and the example of Jesus Christ. Anger and passion, fretfulness and impatience, harshness and moroseness, an unforgiving spirit, either avowed or lurking behind an apparent but unreal forgiveness,—see whether these in any of their forms are inmates of your hearts; confess them, when discovered, to God; and humble yourselves before Him in the sorrow of true repentance.

And secondly, set yourselves in earnest to reform and regulate your tempers. It is a work of necessity, we have seen: it is a work of difficulty also: and must be begun, continued, and ended with fervent prayer for the assistance of God's Holy Spirit. He alone in this, as in all other things, can give us the victory over ourselves. But with this we must also use our utmost endeavours.

And, first, we shall need much watchfulness. Our tempers are parts of ourselves. They are ever with us. We carry them about with us,

and everything we do may minister occasion to them for sin. Our business and our pleasure, company or solitude, alike have their dangers and temptations. We must be sober and vigilant, watching the first ebullitions of temper, and checking them at once by prayer and resolute self-control. We may be often surprised at first, and foiled, but we should but redouble our endeavours; and the task, by God's grace and strength, will gradually become more easy, and our victory over ourselves more complete.

Again, let us often meditate on the character of our Lord Jesus Christ, with a special reference to His meekness, gentleness, patience, and readiness to forgive. He is the model on which we are to form ourselves, the copy after which we are to draw; and on Him our admiring and adoring gaze should often be fixed. We shall be better enabled to "lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and to run with patience the race that is set before us," if we "look unto Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith." *

And lastly, let us encourage and animate ourselves by the reflection, that, while subduing our

* Heb., xii., 1, 2.

tempers by the grace of God, we are being prepared for the enjoyment of that blessed state, which He reserves hereafter for those who love Him. We are now in our probation: we are now in our education for eternity. Habits of meekness, of gentleness, of charity, deep, pure, and enduring, must **be** begun here, that they may be completed in heaven. Every temper which God checks in us, every passion which He subdues, in another pledge of His purposes of mercy towards us; a fresh ground of hope that “He which hath begun a good work in us, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:” * a nearer approach to that throne of light and purity, which is the fountain of all grace and bliss, and in the presence of which is fulness of joy.

* Philip., i., 6.

SINS OF PRIDE AND VANITY.

PHILIPPIANS, ii., 3.

Let nothing be done through strife or vain-glory ; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.

IT is a very frequent complaint among those to whom religion has begun to be a matter of serious concern, that they do not love God nearly so much as in their reason and consciences they are persuaded that they ought. They admit their duty to Him ; they are sensible of their obligations to Him ; but their heart continues cold, dead, and worldly. And doubtless something of this dissatisfied feeling will ever be found in the breasts of the sincere, as long as we continue in this imperfect state of being ; in which not only “do we see through a glass darkly,”* but “the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh ; and

* 1 Cor., xiii., 12.

these are contrary the one to the other : so that we cannot do the things that we would.”* At the same time, it must be confessed, that we do not generally improve the opportunities which God puts into our hands for our own spiritual advantage, nor employ with sufficient earnestness the means of grace. The love of God, for instance, would be much deepened and strengthened by a more accurate knowledge of the sinfulness of sin and of our own sinfulness, than we, for the most part, take the pains to acquire. It was while our Lord Jesus Christ sat at meat in the house of Simon the Pharisee, that a woman “which was a sinner, brought an alabaster box of ointment, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping, and began to wash His feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed His feet, and anointed them with ointment.”† In reply to the murmurs of the Pharisee our Saviour spoke this parable : “There was a certain creditor which had two debtors, the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me, therefore, which of them will love him

* Gal., v., 17.

† Luke, vii.

most? Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And He said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged.* Now we have all sinned deeply and repeatedly against God; and these sins He promises on our repentance to forgive for Jesus Christ's sake. But some have a greater acquaintance with their own sinfulness than others; and none know it so well as they ought. It is evident, however, that those will love God most, who best know the greatness of the guilt which He has forgiven. They best will appreciate His goodness, who are most deeply penetrated with a conviction of their own unworthiness. Hence, it will be well for those, who are grieved with the consciousness that they do not love God as they ought, to aim at a livelier sense of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and of their own sinfulness; that by comparing the infinitude of His mercy with the number and aggravated character of their own offences, they "may be able" the better "to comprehend with all saints, what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge,"† and thus to love Him, who first loved us.

* Luke, vii.

† Eph., iii., 18, 19.

To aid any such attempt as this, and to assist the self-examination and penitence, which should be the employments of the present season, I endeavoured in my first discourse to show from Scripture the exceeding sinfulness of sin ; and in my last, began the consideration of some classes of sins, which, though condemned by the word of God, are lightly treated in the opinion of man, and are likely more or less to escape the observation even of those who are not altogether careless about their souls. We examined then the sins of the temper—anger, fretfulness, and impatience, harshness and moroseness, and an unforgiving spirit : and we found that, however men may disregard them, they are contrary to God's commandments, opposed to the example of our Divine Redeemer, and inconsistent with the very terms of the Christian Covenant.

Let us now throw a brief glance over another class of sins, not less dangerous and still more numerous and subtle, sins of pride and vanity. These may indeed be termed the besetting sins of human nature ; and are the natural offspring of that selfishness, which is the grand disease of our corrupt moral frame. Even before the fall, indeed, these passions appear to have exerted a

baleful influence. We can trace their power in the readiness with which Eve listened to the suggestions of the tempter, when he offered her the lure of wisdom beyond what the Creator had given, and falsely asserted, that "God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."* And undoubtedly their influence is widely extended over all her children. Where is he who is proof against the fascinations of flattery, or the spell of praise? Who is not tempted by overweening thoughts of his own good qualities, and delighted to compare himself complacently with others? Who does not writhe under the smart, when degraded in the estimation of others, even when the degradation arises from events over which he could have no control? And as pride and vanity are universal passions, so they display themselves in a thousand different ways. In no case, under no conceivable circumstances, can they want matter on which to feed. If one is proud of his virtue, another will be proud of his vice. When there is no positive excellence to be found or imagined, the absence of some evil will serve as

* Gen., iii., 5.

a step for vanity to rise on. Birth, station, talent, beauty, wealth, and every grade and kind of earthly good, by turns will minister to this all-present passion. Nay, even spiritual privileges may thus be turned by the carnal mind into poison; men may be puffed up by the religion of the meek and lowly Jesus; and after mortifying vanity in a thousand shapes, may be conquered at last by the conquered foe, and become proud even of their humility. Nor is this class of sins judged severely by mankind in general. When pride indeed swells into haughtiness, and hurts the self-love of others, it is detested, not for itself, but for its effects. Preposterous vanity is ridiculed and despised. But many branches of the same corrupt tree are valued and cherished in the conventional morality of the world; and in its law of honour, pride is at least no vice.

But God judges not as man judges. Let us turn to His word, and weigh these habits in the balance of the sanctuary. They are no light thing there. Again and again they are forbidden and condemned. God's commands condemn them. Our Lord's example condemns them.

They are pointed out as marks of the unrenewed and carnal heart. .

To prove God's estimate of such sins, a few passages only out of very many need be adduced. "Every one that is proud in heart," we read, "is an abomination to the Lord; though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished."* "An high look, and a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked, is sin."† "Pride and arrogancy," says Solomon, speaking in the person of heavenly Wisdom, "and the evil way and the froward mouth, do I hate."‡ "Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and Holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit: to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones."§ And if such was the voice of God under the Law, we may well expect to find it speaking in the same tones in the Gospel. Accordingly two Apostles repeat the warning. "God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble;" and St. Peter joins the exhortation, "Yea, all of you be subject one to

* Prov., xvi., 5.

† Prov., xxi., 4.

‡ Prov., viii., 13.

§ Isaiah, lvii., 15.

another, and be clothed with humility.”* “Let us not be desirous of vain-glory,”† St. Paul wrote to the Galatians; and to the Colossians, “Put on, therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering.”‡ Our blessed Lord required of all who would be His disciples, that they should become as little children; the mysteries of His kingdom were hidden from the wise and prudent in their own conceit, “and revealed unto babes,”§ the humble and teachable: and His apostle Paul thought it necessary to testify to the elders of Miletus and Ephesus, that he “had served the Lord with all humility of mind.”|| Humility indeed is the only Christian greatness, and the foundation of all holiness. When the wife of Zebedee with her two sons had preferred the bold request that they “might sit, the one on His right hand and the other on His left, in His kingdom,” our Lord “called” His apostles “unto Him and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon

* Jam., iv., 6; 1 Pet., v., 5. † Gal., v., 26.

‡ Col., iii., 12. § Matt., xi., 25. || Acts., xx., 19.

them. But it shall not be so among you : but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister," or attendant ; " and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant : even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many."* And He more than once repeated the saying, " Whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased ; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."†

The reason given by our Lord in the passage just quoted leads us to observe further, that sins of pride and vanity are opposed as directly as possible to His example, which is our rule. As man, He was emphatically meek and lowly of heart ; and therefore bids us " learn of Him." He lived for thirty years in poverty and obscurity. During His ministry He was content to be despised, and rejected. He sought no honours, and aimed not at applause. Those whom He healed, He charged that they should not make Him known,‡ and He fulfilled Isaiah's prediction, " He shall not strive nor cry ; neither

* Matt., xx., 20—28.

† Matt., xiii., 12 ; Luke, xiv., 2 ; viii., 14.

‡ Matt., xii., 16.

shall any man hear His voice in the streets.”* He washed His apostles’ feet,† and though “their Lord and Master,” yet “was among them as he that serveth.”‡ And even at the time of His greatest earthly triumph, when all the city was moved to meet Him, as the Messiah, the prophecy of Zechariah was strictly accomplished in Him: “Tell ye the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.”§ But it was not merely *as man* that our Lord taught us humility: that He should vouchsafe to *be made man* is the most wonderful lesson. The Word made flesh to dwell among us,—God manifest in the flesh;—this great truth should itself be sufficient to still every vain thought, and cast down every proud imagination. This is indeed the argument which St. Paul employs in the text: “Let nothing be done through strife or vain-glory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was

* Matt., xii., 20; Isaiah, xliii., 2. † John, xiii., 5.

‡ Luke, xxii., 27. § Matt., xxi., 5; Zech., ix., 9

also in Christ Jesus : who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God ; but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men : and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”* What should the servants be of such a Lord ? Pride, vanity, self-conceit,—can this be the livery of those who follow Him, who for our sakes emptied Himself of the glories of His Divinity, and, though Lord of all, became as one of us ? Do we not rather, while such inmates dwell unmortified in our breasts, confess by our unlikeness to Him that we are none of His ?

For, lastly, if such be the commands of God, and such be the example of our Redeemer, we must be prepared to find that humility is a necessary feature of true Christianity ; and that sins of pride and vanity are pointed out as marks of the unrenewed and carnal heart. When our Saviour was asked, “ Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven ? He called a little child unto Him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except

* Philip., ii., 3—8.

ye be converted, and become as little children, ye cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”* True humility, then, is a necessary part, nay the very threshold and entrance, of real Christianity. Thus St. John, knowing that the love of God is the very substance of religion, which, without it, is an unreal shadow; and warning us “not to love the world, neither the things that are in the world, for if any man love the world the love of the Father is not in him;” goes on to enumerate, as constituting that world, whose love is ruin, not only “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes,” but also “the pride of life.”† Our Saviour classes “pride” among the “evil things,” which “come from within, out of the heart, and defile a man:”‡ and St. Paul ranks the “proud” among those who having “a form of godliness, deny the power thereof.”§ We must therefore admit it as serious and important truth, that sins of pride and vanity, condemned as they are by God’s commandments and our

* Matt., xviii., 1—4.

† 1 John, ii., 15, 16.

‡ Mark, vii., 22, 23.

§ 2 Tim., iii., 2, 5.

Lord's example, are inconsistent with true Christianity, and a heart really set to love and obey our Redeemer.

Bearing in mind, then, this solemn consideration, let us briefly cast our eyes over the many kinds of vanity, conceit, and pride, which prevail among us. There is, for instance, the pride of birth, which makes many look with a kind of contempt on those whose family is not so noble, or so respectable as their own. Now religion is far from diminishing the respect with which we should look up to those whom God's providence has made superior to us in rank; nor would it entirely eradicate the feeling, which makes men anxious not to degenerate from the virtues of their ancestors: but a Christian ought to know, that he is but an unworthy member of one large family; that in the eye of God, worth, not birth, has the precedence; that many who are first in the blazonry of the world's distinctions will be last with Him; and that rank is nothing in His sight, who from these stones could raise up children unto Abraham. And they should feel that, while to despise even the humblest of Christ's disciples is an insult to their Redeemer, the only rank worth caring for

is to be of the family of God,—His child and an inheritor of His kindgom. “Mind not high things,” said the Apostle, “but condescend to men of low estate.” *

There is also the pride of money,—a sin widely prevalent in our day, when society is divided into sections, as it were, according to men’s possessions ; and each grade is too apt to think meanly of those below it. Is it not the case, that, though we may compassionate and relieve the wants of those poorer than ourselves, we find a difficulty,—if indeed we are ever sufficiently humble to make the trial,—in putting ourselves on an exact level with them as to our spiritual privileges ; in considering ourselves fellow-sinners, partakers of the same grace, fellow-heirs of the same promises ? I speak not merely of the wealthy, but of all of us, as far as there are any who are below us in the scale of society. Can we realise in our own sentiments the description which St. Paul gives of the the Church, into which we are baptized, the body of Christ, which “is one and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body ;” and which “God

* Rom., xii., 16.

hath so tempered together, having given more abundant honour to that part that lacked ; that there should be no schism in the body ; but that the members should have the same care one for another : and whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it ; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it ? ” * Can we read without a pang of conscience the inspired reproof of St. James, “ My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment, and ye have respect unto him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place ; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or, Sit here under my footstool : are ye not then partial in yourselves, and become judges of evil thoughts ? Hearken, my beloved brethren,” adds the Apostle earnestly, “ hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which He hath promised to them that love Him ? ” † And that feeling must be a sin,

* 1 Cor., xii., 12, 24—26.

† Jam., ii., 1—5.

which slackens at least, if not rends, the links of Christian love and union with those who are children of the same God, and must be equal at least with us hereafter ; merely because we have allotted us a larger share of those earthly goods, which in no way increase our merit, nor approve us to God, but only involve us in a heavier and more perilous responsibility.

The pride of talent, of wisdom, of education, is another of the sins to which human nature and the temper of our times render us peculiarly liable. We live in days when intellectual ability is more prized than moral worth, and when knowledge of every description (excepting the knowledge of God's truth) is rated usually far above its real value. The consequence is, that men are readily puffed up with any real or imagined mental talent, or any acquirement they may have made : and thus intellectual pride has become one of the prevailing sins of society, from the ponderous knowledge of the deeply-learned and the practised sagacity of the man of science, to him who, having just mastered the rudiments of elementary education, thinks himself entitled to look down with contempt on those less informed than himself. We need not

depreciate the worth of sound and useful learning. We may admit to the full the importance of education. We may admire the talents which God bestows, as He wills, on those whom He is pleased to employ to work out his various purposes. We may, we ought to do this. But we must bear in mind, that we have nothing which we have not received ; that God alone made us to differ from others ; that in His sight mere human knowledge is of little worth ; and that one Christian grace would sink the scale, weighed in the balance of the sanctuary, against the concentrated wisdom of collected ages. Knowledge is an evil when it begets pride, which is a sin ; and there is a humiliating truth recorded for our instruction in the word of God : “ Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit ? there is more hope of a fool than of him.” *

The vanity of personal appearance and dress would seem perhaps a subject more fit for the pen of the satirist, than for the solemnity of the pulpit ; were it not that, tried by Scripture, it must be pronounced, not a foible merely, but a sin. And how unworthy of Christian men and women, called to be children of God and heirs

* Prov., xxvi., 12.

of immortality, to be betrayed into a spirit the very opposite to the Gospel and the example of their Redeemer, by a trifling regard for this clay frame which must soon be laid aside, or for its trappings and ornaments, more worthless and perishable still! And yet does this sin spread through all ranks of society, bringing with it not seldom habits of extravagance and acts of dishonesty, and always a spirit of worldliness, selfishness, and alienation from God.

But it would be impossible to trace this Proteus passion through its innumerable forms,—habits of deprecating and ridiculing others to gratify ourselves secretly by the contrast; self-complacent thoughts and imaginations: the day-dreams of youth and ambition; the almost universal dread of neglect and censure, however undeserved; the general effort for display; the traps laid, as it were, for praise, and concealed often under the lure of an affected humility; the whispering voice within commending all we do, and elating us even in silence and solitude with an exhilarating sense of our own merit;—all this, and much more, must be left, my brethren, to your own experience, as you search, each in the mazes of his own heart, the disguises

which pride and vanity there assume. But I must say a few words of one kind, which if not the most common, is perhaps the most melancholy of any ; as the abuse of the best things is usually proportionably the worst. Spiritual pride is a snare by which Satan too often succeeds in retaining those who would seem to have escaped his power. Made sensible of their sins, and seriously anxious to serve God and save their souls, men become vain of their seriousness and supposed sincerity. They pray, and are vain of their prayers ; are charitable, and are vain of their charity. Their devotions, their acts of self-control, their separation from the world, their internal struggles with sin, their very humility itself, may all become grounds on which to build a pleasing, but sinful, claim of merit. In some this pride remains a secret canker, preying on the core of their religion. In others it swells to a pharisaical affectation of superiority over others, adopting the feeling, if not the words, of God's rebellious people of old, "which said, Stand by thyself, come not near to me ; for I am holier than thou." * And by all it requires to be guarded against by frequent self-reflection,

* Isaiah, lxx., 5.

repeated humiliation, and earnest prayer to Him who alone can rule and cleanse the heart.

Such then is a very imperfect sketch of the sins of pride and vanity, which are so contrary to God's commandments, so opposite to the example of our Redeemer, so contradictory to the spirit and character of the Gospel, that we cannot wonder to see them placed prominently forward among the marks of the unrenewed and carnal heart. Let it be our care, my brethren, to search them out in our own breasts, and to confess them in sorrowful repentance to God; remembering the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and the condemnation which it justly deserves; but remembering too the infinite mercy of God in Jesus Christ, and praying, hoping, trusting, for pardon for His sake. And at the same time let us form steadfast resolutions, and from henceforth employ all our efforts, to check the passions of pride, vanity, and conceit, and to form habits of sincere humility.

This is no easy task, dear brethren. They are sins tenacious of life, and assuming forms innumerable. Like certain diseases, if healed in one place they are apt to break out in another. It would be impossible to subdue them, but that

with God all things are possible. To Him then let us first and continually apply for aid, and beseech Him daily to beat down in us the power of pride, and to clothe us with humility; to implant "that mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus;" and to teach us so to "learn of Him," who is "meek and lowly of heart," that we may "find rest unto our souls."

Secondly, we should accustom ourselves to meditate on our own sinfulness and vileness. Much of the influence of vanity and pride may be attributed to neglect of self-consideration. We look on the faults of others, and on our own good deeds, and thus become uncharitable at once and proud. We should, on the contrary, judge others in a spirit of love, conceal all things, believe all things, hope all things. In ourselves we should probe the evil to the bottom, endeavour to gain a true knowledge of ourselves, and of our real weakness, worthlessness, and guilt. Oh, if we could see our hearts as they must appear to God, surely vanity would be impossible, and our only attitude, humiliation and shame!

We should meditate also on our distance from God, till we learn to know our own littleness.

He in heaven, we on earth ; He infinite, we minutest atoms in a universe itself minute to Him ; He eternal, we the creatures of a day ; He almighty, we weak and helpless ; He inexpressibly and inconceivably holy, we sinful by birth, by will, by practice. Thus may our swelling thoughts be taught to shrink within the limits of our own insignificance, and our vanity be checked by the question of the son of Sirach, "Why is earth and ashes proud ?" *

But, above all, we should meditate much and often on the humility of our Divine Redeemer. God made man for us ; the Lord of glory, born in a stable and cradled in a manger ; the Creator of the world, mocked, scourged, crucified by His creatures :—surely pride should be impossible to those who contemplate such truths as these. And as man His whole life is a lesson of true humility to be studied by us, admired and imitated ; that in this, as in all the other lovely features of His character, "with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, we may be changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." †

And lastly, we must be strictly watchful over

* Eccus., x., 9

† 2 Cor., iv., 18.

ourselves to detect the secret foe, and to check the rising thought of vanity at once. We must shun, as much as may be consistently with duty, the scenes and employments which experience teaches us are most apt to foster pride. The world has many such, which it calls innocent. We must take disappointments and reverses, shame, ridicule, and contempt, as sent by God to aid us in our struggle with ourself, and must patiently and thankfully turn them to good account. Nay,—we must mortify ourselves; denying ourselves honour, respect, and praise, and satisfied to lose the approbation of men, if He regard us who seeth in secret. We shall not labour for nought. The reward is well worth the contest. True humility is real glory; the mother of peace and the sister of happiness. It is the Christian's badge, the image of Christ, the chosen habitation of the Holy One who inhabiteth eternity. It is the robe of heaven's inhabitants, the symbol of their dignity; and if there be a cherub nearer than others to the throne of glory, it is humility which has exalted him.

SINS OF THE THOUGHTS.

ECCLESIASTES, xii., 14.

For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

OF the many practical errors which tend to deaden our sense of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and thus to indispose us to real repentance, not the least dangerous is that which estimates the guilt of an offence almost entirely by the outward act, neglecting or underrating the internal processes from which it proceeds. In this way, indeed, we are to a certain extent obliged to form our judgment of the merits and demerits of others. Their actions alone are obvious to us; the moral machinery, so to speak, works concealed from our view. We can measure the health and vigour of the tree

only by the character of its produce ; and are therefore furnished by Divine wisdom itself with the practical rule, “By their fruits ye shall know them.”* But men are apt to apply this principle from others to themselves ; and, provided their external conduct is correct, to examine or care little what is going on within. Thus their life becomes a system of mere outward decencies, without any of the principles of true religion, or even of ordinary morality ; and sin may have undisputed possession of their hearts, while in their conduct the world may find nothing to blame. How possible this combination is, we may learn from the Scribes and Pharisees of old, who were conscientiously scrupulous of outward acts, “paid tithe of mint, and anise, and cummin,” and thanked God they were not as other men are, but “omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith,” and who were, therefore, in our Lord’s expressive language, “like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.”† And how many, must we fear, in our own day, and amidst the light of Christianity,

* Matt., vii., 20.

† Matt., xxv., 23, 27.

pass through the world with a fair reputation and the name of virtue, in whose hearts reign evil thoughts, sinful principles, and selfishness unrestrained. And yet even heathen morality could teach the truth, that virtue and vice derive their character not so much from the outward act, as from the motive and intention; that to judge of ourselves we must look to our principles; nay, that the goodness and badness of actions themselves are, in a certain sense, accidental and independent of our virtue and vice: so that a good man may do a bad act, and even be good for doing it; and a bad man may do a good action in such a way as justly to incur fresh guilt. An honest man may ruin his neighbour in a well-meant attempt to aid him; and we may receive the greatest kindness from a wicked man, who is all the while intent on some sinful gratification of self.

And if it be the procedure of even sound human morality to judge of virtue and vice, not by the act only, but by the internal motives and principles, much more might we infer it to be His, who is free from all the obstacles which impede our human judgment. We can only conjecture the motives and intents of others; our own even

it is difficult to disentangle and clearly discern. But God “knows the hearts of all the children of men.”* “The Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imagination of the thoughts.”† “Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in His sight; but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.”‡ And therefore we read, “The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”§ “I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.”|| With this perfect knowledge, then, it is evident that God’s judgment of our sinfulness cannot for a moment be supposed to be limited to our external actions, but must extend at once to the source of evil within. “Thou requirest truth,” says David, “in the inward parts.”¶ Hence the thoughts, which are our internal actions, are noted and judged by Him. “Understood” by Him “afar off,” they are

* 1 Kings, viii., 39.

† Heb., iv., 13.

|| Jer., xvii., 10.

† 1 Chron., xxviii., 9.

§ 1 Sam., xvi., 7.

¶ Ps. li., 6.

weighed in the balance of His justice, and added when found wanting to the account of our sins. And, oh ! what a fearful page in the book of God's remembrance must be filled by the record of those innumerable thoughts which throng the mind in rapid and scarce distinguishable succession, each bearing from its birthplace in the heart some burden or trace of native corruption ; now glowing with anger and now burning with lust, now fluttering on the wings of vanity, now dark with envy, discontent, or hate.

Thoughts, indeed, are often doubly sinful : sinful in themselves, and the parents of sinful words and acts. And they are the expositors of the real condition of the heart, embodying those habits, and displaying those passions, which prudence or want of opportunity restrain from breaking forth into spoken or acted sin. They are a truer picture of ourselves than are our lives ; because we have neither the same temptation nor power to gloss them over with a fair appearance.

These few observations will be sufficient to show the importance of forming a true estimate of the sinfulness of sins of the thoughts : that we may be enabled sincerely to repent of what

God hates, and to seek to be renewed, not in our outward walk merely, but in the spirit of our minds. And this is the rather necessary, because, these are sins of which the world takes no cognizance, and to which we are usually very indulgent ourselves. Many, indeed, take no account of their thoughts at all, but let them pass at will unchecked and unheeded through the mind, as if they were no more responsible for them than for their dreams. Others knowingly and willingly indulge their thoughts ; enjoy in imagination those sins which they dare not act ; and are scarcely troubled by the voice of conscience, because, as they suppose, they have not openly violated any of God's commandments. And all, it is to be feared, are too apt to think lightly of sins of the thoughts, as if they were things of course, scarcely to be avoided, and when committed, venial, and of trivial import.

To the law and to the testimony, then, let us again betake ourselves ; and we shall find that both in the Old Testament and in the New it is required that our thoughts be free from sin ; while in both we are warned that for our

thoughts we shall have to give account in the day of judgment.

We may observe, then, first, that in the Old Testament the thoughts are often spoken of as the seat, or occasions of sin. When the inspired historian was to describe the iniquity of the world before the flood, he tells us that "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is only evil continually."* David, speaking of "the wicked," who "through the pride of his countenance will not seek after God," adds, "God is not in all his thoughts."† His own protestation is, "I hate vain thoughts: but thy law do I love."‡ And Solomon has left us the distinct assurance, that "the thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord."§

But it is one of the distinguishing features of the Gospel, as compared with the former dispensation, that it is more spiritual. Its laws are written in the heart. Its worship is in spirit and in truth. We might expect, then, to find sins of the thoughts more strictly guarded against in it, than by the Law. And accordingly

* Gen., vi., 5.

† Ps. cxix., 113.

‡ Ps. x., 4.

§ Prov., xv., 26.

our Lord, in His sermon on the mount, commenting on the commandments, extends their force and sanctions from the outward action to the inward thoughts; and teaches us that, without committing any sin of which men can take cognizance, we may be murderers and adulterers in our hearts.* And at another time, He classes "evil thoughts" with "murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness and blasphemies," as being the things which "come forth from the heart, and defile the man."†

The position, indeed, and privileges of Christians under the new covenant, are such as necessarily attach much consequence to sins of the thoughts. They are buried with Christ in baptism, to rise with him to newness of life.‡ They are to "seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God;" § and no longer "to mind earthly things." They are "not their own, but are bought with a price." Their hearts, as well as their bodies, are "the temple of the Holy Ghost." They must admit, then, no impure unholy, vain, or trifling inmates there. The

* Matt., v.

† Matt., iv., 18, 19.

‡ Rom., vi., 4.

§ Col., iii., 1.

shrine must be kept unprofaned : and they must “ glorify God in their body and in their spirit which are God’s.” *

And lastly, God has distinctly forewarned us that so far from our thoughts being harmless,—mere mental phenomena for which we are not responsible,—we shall have to give account of them all at the day of judgment. Such indeed is the import of the text, with which the royal moralist concludes his inquiry into human happiness and human duty. “ Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter : Fear God and keep His commandments ; for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing,”—each inmost thought of the heart,—“ whether it be good, or whether it be evil.” St. Paul in like manner speaks of the judgment as “ the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ :” † and desires the Corinthians to “ judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts.” ‡ It is a solemn thought !

* 1 Cor., vi., 19, 20. † Rom., ii., 16.

‡ 1 Cor., iv., 5.

“ There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed ; neither hid, that shall not be known.”* Before the assembled myriads of all the earth’s inhabitants, before listening angels, before the great Judge Himself, the secrets of our hearts will be laid bare, and our inmost thoughts brought into the light of justice. The veil of hypocrisy will drop off ; and many, who in the praise of men have had their reward, will stand exposed in the shame and deformity of their own imaginations. The self-deceiver and the careless alike will be dismayed at the array of sins, which dwelt unheeded, if not encouraged, in the secret chambers of their hearts. And the most faithful, watchful Christian, may find matter for serious meditation in the truth that his every thought, as well as word and work, must be exposed on that day to the scrutiny of a most righteous Judge.

Such considerations, dear brethren, put sins of the thoughts in a very different light from that in which men usually view them ; as condemned by the word of God both in the Old and New Testaments ; as inconsistent with our privileges and position as Christians ; and as

* Matt., x., 26.

amenable to the solemn account at the last day. It is obvious, then, that they are sins, which, on the one hand, we should seek out, to confess and repent of; and on the other, should guard against with habitual caution and self-control. It is with the thoughts Satan is most busy. Here he works most concealed, and gives the least alarm. By occupying and poisoning these, he prepares the way for more open sins, undermines resolutions and principles, weakens the force of better habits, inflames the passions, and gradually familiarises men to evil. Sinful thoughts indulged, become soon, he knows, sinful words and actions; and thus, besides their own guilt, prepare the way for other and more open transgression. In proportion, then, to his art and the danger, ought to be our watchfulness and care.

It were vain to attempt to enumerate, or even class, the sins of which we are now speaking. They are as many in kind as are the external sinful acts to which they are akin. A few remarks are all that can be offered.

Sins of vanity are almost entirely in the thoughts. Of these we spoke in the last discourse, and need not repeat the subject now.

But it may be well to warn you, my brethren, and especially my younger hearers, against indulging self-pleasing reveries, day-dreams of imaginary scenes and fancied successes, in all of which self is the hero, and which are indeed but artifices which the mind contrives for flattering vanity, when it cannot find food enough in the occupations and incidents of ordinary life. These not only are a waste of time and energy, which should be turned to better account; not only do they unfit us for our proper duties and give an unhealthy tone to the whole character; but they are actual sins,—vain thoughts,—puffing us up in our own conceit, inconsistent with the humility of the Gospel, and among the abuses of our mental powers for which we shall have to render an account to Him who gave them. They must be checked by all who would “walk humbly with their God.”

Impure thoughts, again, require to be spoken of in a tone of serious and anxious warning. Very many, it is to be feared, indulge in these with little scruple, content that they abstain from the actual and open sin. But, my brethren, we know our Lord’s judgment on this point. He has taught us that the commandments may

be broken in the heart. In His sight our thoughts are sins ; and He it is who will come to be our Judge. And besides their own sinfulness, impure thoughts prepare the way for sinful words and actions. They throw down the defences of the soul, and lay it open to the attacks of temptation. They are as traitors within, ready to co-operate with the enemy without. And there is this further evil in such thoughts as these : they leave a stain on the soul, which in this life at least is indelible. They may have been repented of ; they may, we may trust, have been pardoned ; but our corrupt moral nature is tenacious to retain what is bad ; and evil thoughts, once indulged, will ever and anon return. We may dread them, we may abhor them, but we cannot erase the black stain from the page of memory. They are their own avengers.

Uncharitable thoughts will be found to form another and very numerous class of sins. It would be a great mistake to suppose that the great rule of Christian love can be broken only by outward acts and behaviour. On the contrary, St. Paul speaks of charity as that which

“thinketh no evil.”* But men too often do “think evil” of their brethren. They note their failings and imagine more; not for the purpose of praying for them and correcting them, but to draw a secret satisfaction from the thought. They are vexed at the successes of others, and not displeased at their failure. They attribute bad motives to their good actions, and aggravate in imagination their faults. They conceive an ill-will against some one, and are fond of rehearsing, as it were, in their hearts imaginary quarrels and contests with him. And thus without proceeding so far as hatred, which is murder, they break the bonds of love, which is the necessary badge of Christianity, and destroy the grace of charity, without which, knowledge, and almsgiving, and even an unflinching faith itself, are nothing.

But besides these classes of more obviously sinful thoughts, the indulgence of idle thoughts must be considered a sin. I do not mean that the mind is never to be relaxed,—that the strained bow is to be for ever bent. While the powers of the intellect rest, the thoughts will run on, ever unconsciously, over trifling things.

* 1 Cor., xiii., 5.

But I am speaking of habits of mental sloth, analogous to bodily indolence, which suffers the mind to be filled perpetually with the merest trifles, which is impatient of continuous thought on any subject, and which turns away from the consideration of serious and important things as demanding too great an effort. This is the frame of mind naturally resulting from the desultory, trifling reading of the present day ; and, though not confined to them, is peculiarly the danger of that sex, whose occupations are not usually of a sufficiently exciting character to oblige them to think more closely and continuously. And thus the mental powers become weakened and dissipated : trifles are the mind's food, till it can relish nothing but trifles ; and it becomes difficult, and well-nigh impossible, to fix the faculties on anything which is really worth their energies. Now this is not a weakness merely : it is a sin. Our mental powers are talents given to us by God to be improved ; we conceal and neglect them. His purpose is, that they should be employed in His honour, to the good of our souls, and the benefit of His creatures : we spend them on trifles. Our time too is His gift, and to be accounted for to Him : we waste it in vain

thoughts. Religion besides,—real religion,—the effect of grace upon sober reason,—can have no hold upon such a mind as this. To understand God's word we must meditate upon it. To know our own sinfulness, we must be capable of looking with a steady eye into our own hearts. To value God's mercy and to love Him, we must be able to dwell in adoring thought on His attributes, the wonders of His redeeming grace, our own vileness and His exceeding goodness, and on Himself, revealed to us in the person of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The Christian should have the mastery of his thoughts, as well as of his appetites, and be able to turn them to the service of God. To this pertain the exhortations of Scripture to be "sober"* and the expression of Paul to Timothy, "God hath given us the spirit of a sound mind:"† and it is this trifling spirit which is condemned in the words of Solomon: "Wisdom is before him that hath understanding; but the eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth."‡

But to quit a subject which can hardly be exhausted, let us conclude with one or two

* 1 Thess., v., 6—8; 1 Peter, i., 13; iv., 7; x., 8.

† 2 Tim., i., 7.

‡ Prov., xvii., 24.

practical remarks. And first, it has been the one object of our meditations this Lent to extend our knowledge and deepen our sense of sin, in order that our repentance may be quickened; and that judging ourselves here, and humbly confessing our offences before God, we may receive the pardon which He has promised for Jesus Christ's sake. Let us then, dear brethren, as the improvement of the subject we have been considering, examine carefully the general tenor of our thoughts. Let us ask, whether their usual character is sober, profitable, and godly; or whether they are vain, trifling, and worldly? Do we detect among them thoughts of pride, self-esteem, impurity, or uncharitableness in some of its various forms; and are these, when they occur, checked at once and expelled, or suffered, if not encouraged and delighted in? These are questions which we should seriously ask and sincerely answer; and should lay the result before God in humble penitence, and prayer for pardon and for grace.

At the same time, let us resolve to exercise for the time to come a strict supervision of our thoughts. Great self-discipline will be here required. We must endeavour at all times to

check wandering ideas, even when not in themselves unlawful ; and to fix the mind steadily on the subject before it. We must watch the first entrance of forbidden thoughts, and must endeavour to expel them by mentally protesting against them, by offering a short, earnest prayer for help, and by resolutely turning the attention upon something else. This task, difficult at first, will become easier by habit ; and, if we are in earnest and look up to Him for strength, God will give us at length the victory over ourselves. But especially let me recommend this discipline to the young. Endeavour to gain the mastery over your thoughts ; to restrain their wanderings ; and to fix them, time by time, on what you ought to be thinking about. It is a habit you may form now, much more readily than in after life. You will find the advantage in a mind better trained and adapted for the duties and pursuits of this life, and, still more, better fitted for the service of God. And you will escape those foul stains, which ill-regulated thoughts ever imprint upon the page of memory ; and which in after years the soul would give the world to obliterate, but cannot.

But thirdly, a right direction and character

should be given to our thoughts by accustoming ourselves to fix them on profitable objects. Meditation is a very difficult as well as a very important duty. We are naturally indisposed to think seriously and connectedly. We prefer to let the current of ideas float by as it will, without making any effort to direct its course. And here is one of the ways in which we should deny ourselves. We should oblige ourselves to think of what we ought, not of what we would. Subjects for profitable meditation abound. Nature is full of them, and the course of God's providence; but above all, they are most richly supplied by the wonders of His redeeming grace. The word of God should be the most frequent source of our topics of meditation. Our sinfulness and God's love; life and death; heaven and hell; the infinite mercies of redemption; the graces and duties of the Christian character; and chiefly the example of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ;—these are the topics, which having culled them from the sacred page, we should by meditation mark, learn, and inwardly digest. Thus will the mind be occupied, strengthened, and improved. Sinful thoughts will be excluded by more fitting occupants.

And we shall grow in the knowledge of heavenly things, becoming by God's grace more spiritually-minded, and learning day by day to "walk" more steadily "by faith," and "not by sight."

Fourthly, that we may not flag or grow negligent in our efforts, let us often call to mind, that as our thoughts are all known to God now, so they will all be brought to judgment by Him hereafter. Our hearts are now bare to Him. Every silent thought is as audible to Him, as if uttered with the blast of a trumpet. We can hide nothing from Him, "O Lord, Thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my down-sitting and mine uprising, Thou understandest my thought afar off."* And it is He who "will bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil." Let us endeavour to gain an abiding conviction of this solemn truth. Let us remember God's eye ever upon us, and piercing to the inmost recesses of the heart. And let us check each sinful, wandering thought, with the belief, that for all these things God will bring us to judgment.

* Ps. cxxxix., 1, 2.

And lastly, let all our efforts be accompanied with earnest prayer. As our hearts are known to God, so they are wholly in His power to turn them as he will. As all sin can be subdued but by the Holy Ghost, so it is especially true with respect to sinful thoughts. They are far too numerous and too subtle to be suppressed by our own efforts, and spring too readily from our heart's evil soil.

In struggle with such foes, "the weapons of our warfare must not be carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds," in order to the "casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringeth into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."* Let it then be our daily, earnest prayer to him, who sees that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves, that He will "keep us not only outwardly in our bodies, but inwardly in our souls: that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul." And let us make

* 2 Cor., x., 4, 5.

David's petition ours: "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."*

* Ps. cxxxix., 23, 24

SINS OF THE TONGUE.

JAMES, i., 26.

If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.

THE faculty of speech is one of the best gifts of God's mercy to man. It is an essential element of his well-being. Without it, though placed in a world teeming with inhabitants, he would have dragged on an all but isolated existence, communing only with his own thoughts, and these dull and sluggish for want of intercourse and collision with other minds. A helpless and desolate being he would have been, incapable of that unity of purpose which blends the wills of many into one, and thus of the union of weakness creates strength; and inferior to

many of the brute creation, in whom instinct supplies this social bond, and joins them in leagues of mutual assistance and defence. But God could not leave His last work thus imperfect. The gift of speech, as it distinguished man from the most sagacious and reasonable of the brute creation, formed also a medium of communication from mind to mind, and gave men access into the hearts of one another. It gave not existence, indeed, but scope and energy to the affections, and enabled them to fly abroad to call forth kindred affections from other breasts. It rendered the increase of knowledge possible; and advanced the cause of truth by enabling each individual inquirer to pour his discoveries into the common stock, and to share in those of others in return. It sharpened the faculties by the play of intellects one on the other; and enriched all minds by the mutual interchange of the ideas of each. It unlocked the gates of sympathy—of compassion, affection, and charity—and thus gave liberty not only to the best virtues, but also to the purest happiness of our nature. It was, therefore, that the heathen, both poets and philosophers, would define man by the gift of speech, as his distinguishing quality: and that the tongue,

in Scripture, is called the glory of man. "Awake up, my glory,"* said David: "I will sing and give praise, even with my glory."†

It is not the least melancholy effect of the fall, then, that this noble faculty should be degraded from its high purposes to be the minister of sin. Formed to be the messenger of peace and love, knitting hearts together in a mutual bond of amity, it has become the fomentor of jealousy, distrust, and ill-will, the lash of uncharitableness, and the weapon of hatred. Intended to be the interpreter of sincerity and the propagator of truth, it has been made the ready instrument of falsehood and deceit. Created to speak the praises of God, and to give utterance to the feelings of thankfulness, it is wasted on the follies of worldliness and self, and profaned by the awful accents of impurity, impiety, and blasphemy. It has become the index of the corruption of our moral nature, the test by which we may, in a great degree, gauge and measure the spiritual unsoundness and sinfulness of our souls; "for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."‡

* Ps. lvii., 8.

† Ps. cviii., 1.

‡ Matt., xxi., 34.

It is obvious, then, that sins of the tongue hold a prominent place among those sins which, in order to true repentance, we must search out, examine, and condemn in ourselves, that we may seek forgiveness of them from God through the merits of Jesus Christ. Some, indeed, of this class of sins are of so daring and offensive a character, that few, one would think, in a Christian country would require to have their wickedness pointed out. Lying, swearing, obscenity, and blasphemy, are offences from which the mind recoils ; and against which even the world has pronounced its verdict of condemnation. But this is not the case with all sins of the tongue ; some of which are wholly acquitted by mere human morality, and others are estimated far below the standard of their real sinfulness. Nor are we, perhaps, in any instance, in the habit of fully admitting the guilt of this kind of sins : nor consequently, of either confessing them with sufficient sorrow, or guarding against them with sufficient care.

Let us then, as we have done in the case of other sins, first observe the estimate of them with which we are furnished by the word of God ; then briefly enumerate some of the sins of

the tongue of which we may be in the greatest danger; and conclude with a few practical remarks.

Now of God's estimate of this kind of sins we are assured beyond any possibility of doubt, as well as by His declarations both in the Old and New Testaments, as by the precept and example of our Lord; and by the solemn account which, it is revealed, we shall have to render of our words.

A few passages out of many will suffice. When David calls children to him, that he may "teach them the fear of the Lord," his very first precept is, "Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile,"* and his words are applied and enforced by St. Peter.† "The wicked," we read in the book of Proverbs, "is snared by the transgression of his lips."‡ "A fool's mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul."§ "Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin."|| "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise."¶

* Ps. xxxiv., 11, 13.

† Prov., xii., 13.

|| Eccles., v., 6.

† 1 Peter, iii., 10.

§ Prov., xviii., 7.

¶ Prov., x., 19.

Of the teaching of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament the words of the text are a striking example. St. James is warning the disciples against a mere form of godliness without the power, and exhorting them to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only:" and one of the tests by which he bids them prove their sincerity, is freedom from the very sins of which we are speaking. "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain." He afterwards pursues the subject more at length, and points out the difficulty, as well as the necessity, of self-control in this respect. "In many things," he says, "we offend all."* "If any man offend not in word, the same also is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body." The influence of the tongue on the general character is then illustrated by two apt similes: "Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about the whole body. Behold also the ships, which, though they be so great and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, withersoever the governor

* Chap. iii., 2, &c.

listeth. Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things." He then enforces, in very strong and expressive language, the mischievous effects of an ill-regulated tongue. "Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity; so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature, and it is set on fire of hell," by those evil feelings which have the devil for their author and instigator. Nor is the difficulty of governing the tongue less than the guilt of indulging it. "For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed by mankind, but the tongue can no man tame: it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." Hence it is, that that faculty, which was given us to glorify our Creator, is employed to purposes which He abhors: and that His worship is profaned by lips desecrated by words of sins. "Therewith bless we God, even the Father: and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the

same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig-tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh. Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him show out of a good conversation his words with meekness of wisdom."

Nothing need be added to this remarkable passage to show the serious light in which sins of the tongue are exhibited in the New Testament. But if confirmation were required, it might be furnished by our blessed Lord's example to conform to which is duty, and to err from which is sin. "He did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth."* From thence there issued no idle words, no expressions of vanity, uncharitableness, or deceit. When He spoke, it was to teach, to comfort, to heal, or to reprove. "All bare Him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth."† The very officers who were sent to apprehend Him returned without performing their orders, and excused themselves on the plea, "Never man spake like this

* 1 Peter, ii., 22.

† Luke, iv., 22.

man.”* Words of folly and of sin must mar our likeness to such a Saviour as this.

But there is another consideration, far too solemn and important to be omitted; that for every abuse of the faculty of speech we shall have to answer to our God hereafter, “I say unto you,” said He, who Himself will come to be our Judge, “that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.”† Sins of the tongue, then, are no trifling things. Not only are they pointed out and forbidden in the word of God; not only are they contrary to the example of our Lord and Saviour; but they fly upward to the throne of heaven, and testify against us in judgment. Oh no; believe it not! those accents do not die away with the breath that forms them;—they are living still. Each word of anger, or malice, or falsehood, or impurity, or blasphemy, or pride,—yea, every idle word, the useless product of the vain and worldly heart,—will dwell upon the memory of infinite justice; will make itself heard before the assembled myriads of men and

* John, vii., 46.

† Matt., xii., 36, 37.

angels; and join its echoes to swell the condemnation of the unrepentant on that awful day.

With this conviction, then, of the sinfulness of sins of the tongue, let us proceed briefly to consider some of the forms under which they usually occur.

We have said, that many sins of the tongue are so obvious, that none can be wilfully guilty of them, but those who are wholly destitute of religion,—a class whom we are not now addressing. Of this kind are sins of falsehood, as far as that is a wilful and direct breach of truth:—a crime which the world itself brands with disgrace, and whose condemnation is pronounced in Scripture in words which, once read, can scarcely be forgotten: “Ye are of your father, the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own; for he is a liar, and the father of it.”* And therefore among those who will be shut out from the heavenly Jerusalem, we cannot wonder to find “whosoever loveth and maketh a lie.”† But many are guilty of falsehood,

* John, viii., 44.

† Rev., xxii., 15.

whose conscience does not accuse them, when they read such passages as these. There is a practice, for instance, the offspring of vanity and inconsideration, of embellishing stories to heighten their effect, and gratifying at the same time our hearers and our own love of display. It matters little that such habits may be called harmless, and tending rather to amuse than to injure. Whatever is more than truth is falsehood; and, besides its own sinfulness, weakens the moral sense, and destroys the healthy tone of a sensitive conscience. A careful self-examination, my brethren, will show that we have all need of watchfulness and self-control on this head.

To falsehood, too, belongs the sin of flattery; by which I do not mean here the praising others falsely with a view to profit by them, which is the worst kind of dishonesty; but that flattery which takes the name of courtesy, and which men are apt to imagine is demanded of them by good breeding and even by Christian charity. Now we certainly are not obliged to upbraid our neighbours with their faults, nor even to notice them, excepting where to do so may lead to their amendment or tend to God's honour. But

then nothing whatever can make it right for us by undeserved praise or undue complaisance to strengthen another in too good an opinion of his own merits, and to darken the mist of vanity which conceals his real character from himself. They who do this skilfully, indeed, will be generally sure of the good-will of others; and if they are content with the praise of men, instead of the praise which cometh from God, they may usually have their reward. But they are guilty of falsehood. They are incurring the condemnation of "lying lips and a deceitful tongue." They need to be reminded of the warnings of Scripture; "He that speaketh flattery to his friends, even the eyes of his children shall fail."* "Meddle not with him that flattereth with his lips."†

There is a sin of the tongue, at once so wicked, disgraceful, and senseless, that it moves wonder that it should be so commonly heard; that is, profane swearing. This sin, indeed, may truly be called *devilish*; for it has no temptation,—no one thing to recommend it,—but that it is a sin. Nor should I mention it here, but that there are some persons, who, though

* Job, xvii., 5.

† Prov., xx., 19.

they would on no account be guilty of a direct oath, yet indulge in expressions of the like nature, which they consider harmless. Now this was exactly the practice of the Jews of our Saviour's time, who scrupulously abstained from pronouncing the name of Jehovah, but swore commonly by heaven, by the temple, by their head, and the like. Our Lord's judgment is well known: "I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: nor by the earth; for it is His footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King: neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be Yea, yea; Nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil."* These harmless oaths, then, my brethren, are a breach of God's commandments, and, as such, sins injurious to the soul.

Perhaps the most common of all sins of the tongue are sins of uncharitableness; by which I do not mean words indicative of malice, hatred, and revenge, which are sins of a deeper dye than we are now considering; nor expressions of anger, fretfulness, and impatience, which we

* Matt., v., 34—37.

have already noticed, while speaking of sins of the temper; but censoriousness and, what is usually termed, scandal,—a satisfaction in canvassing the faults and follies of others, and in repeating what we have heard to their disadvantage. How much of ordinary conversation is made up of such materials! Now what we thus say must either be true or not. If not,—(and how generally are the reports of the day exaggerated, if not invented wholly!),—we are guilty of falsehood, and of bearing false witness against our neighbour. And even if true, unless the honour of God or the interests of others require us to make it known, we should rather conceal what we know in charitable silence, and put the best construction we can on our brother's faults. It was one of the commandments of the Levitical law: "Thou shalt not go up and down as a tale-bearer among thy people:"* and as all "evil speaking" is to be put away among Christians,† so charity, without which we are Christians only in name, "thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth: beareth," or rather con-

* Levit., xix., 16.

† Eph., iv., 31

cealeth,* “all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things.”†

Another common abuse of the gift of speech is to employ it in the service of vanity; to talk, neither for the purpose of instructing, nor learning, nor the mutual interchange of kind and wholesome sentiments, nor even of mere relaxation, but of display; to extort admiration by our learning, or to win it by our wit, or to seek it (probably in vain) by a boastful enumeration of our qualifications, actions, or intentions. It is not to the purpose to say, that such attempts generally fail of their end; that men are easily disgusted by the efforts of vanity to win applause; and that, even by the world’s verdicts, “whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” Successful, or not, the attempt is sinful; and he who employs his tongue to pander to his vanity, abuses a talent committed to him to be improved, while he neglects the teaching of the Holy Spirit: “Let nothing be done through strife or vain-glory; but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem other better than themselves.”‡

* πάντα στέγει.

† 1 Cor., xiii., 6, 7.

‡ Phil., ii., 3.

Lastly, we may observe that idle talking is a sin. This follows indeed necessarily from the truth, that the gift of speech is committed to us as a talent, to be used in the service of God to our own and our neighbour's profit. To employ it idly is, at best, to hide our talent. I do not mean that cheerful conversation is sinful; the great alleviator of the toils and cares of life, and that which braces the energies for fresh efforts of usefulness. Far from it. "There are secondary uses of our faculties:" says one of the most acute and able prelates of the Anglican Church: "they administer to delight as well as to necessity; and as they are equally adapted to both, there is no doubt but God intended them for our gratification, as well as for the support and continuance of our being. The secondary use of speech is to please and be entertaining to each other in conversation. This is in every respect allowable and right: it unites men closer in alliances and friendships; gives us a fellow-feeling of the prosperity and unhappiness of each other; and is in several respects serviceable to virtue, and to promote good behaviour in the world. And provided there be not too much time spent in it, if it were con-

sidered only in the way of gratification and delight, men must have strange notions of God and of religion, to think that He can be offended with it, or that it is in any way inconsistent with the strictest virtue. But the truth is, such sort of conversation, though it has no particular good tendency, yet it has a general good one : it is social and friendly, and tends to promote humanity, good nature, and civility.”* But while we thus admit the innocence and utility of cheerful conversation and mirth chastened by the fear of God, let us not attempt to excuse under these names that trifling loquacity, which talks for talking sake, wasting the time both of speaker and hearer, and tending to no conceivable good. Our conversation, to be innocent, must be at least “seasoned with salt.” Mere idle words are, and will be judged as, sin. Besides, they who talk much, will seldom long talk innocently. An unbridled tongue will hurry us into evil speaking, for lack of other matter : and the caution of Solomon cannot be too carefully remembered : “In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin ; but he that refraineth his lips is wise.”†

* Bp. Butler, “Sermon on the Government of the Tongue.”

† Prov., x., 19.

Let us examine ourselves, then, dear brethren, and see whether we may not be guilty of sins of the tongue in some at least of their forms. It is wise to judge ourselves in that for which we shall be judged hereafter. Let us confess our transgressions when discovered — as discover them we doubtless shall—and pray earnestly for their pardon for His sake, who is the propiation for our sins. And let us steadfastly resolve henceforth so to bridle our tongue, and set a watch upon our lips, that our religion may not be rendered vain by our words, nor our conversation be unfitting the disciples of the meek and guileless Jesus.

And here one or two practical remarks may not be without their use.

And first: “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.” It is in vain to attempt to heal the stream of an embittered fount. To avoid sins of the tongue, and the condemnation they will draw down, we must begin the reformation at the heart. “Either make the tree good and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit.”* When

* Matt., xii., 33.

malice, deceit, uncharitableness and vanity, are in the heart, the words will be malicious, false, uncharitable, and vain. "O generation of vipers," exclaimed our blessed Lord, "how can ye, being evil, speak good things?"* Before all things, and above all things, let us seek from God a new heart and a right spirit, the only source and groundwork of Christian virtue. Let us entreat God, for the sake of Him who died and rose again for us, to destroy the power of sin in us, and to re-create us in His own image. Let us give ourselves up to the guidance of His Holy Spirit, and to the utmost of our power co-operate with Him, "working out our own salvation with fear and trembling;" that by His inspiration we may be made, as to our moral state, "new creatures," that "old things have passed away, all things" may "become new." As the rest of our character and actions, so our words will partake of the blessed change. No longer misused to the purposes of sin, they will become the servants of righteousness, and tend, directly or indirectly, to glorify God and benefit His creatures. For "a good man out of the good treasure of his heart

* Matt., v., 34.

bringeth forth good things : and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things.”*

But, secondly, and more particularly, we must carefully watch our words, and put a restraint upon them. We must not let them pass by unexamined or unproved, but must each day question their tenor and character, whether they have been agreeable to God’s word and our Lord’s example. Nor must we let our mouths utter whatever our thoughts suggest. We must practise self-denial : we must “bridle our tongue.” Not only must we carefully silence all expressions savouring of falsehood, irreverence or malice ; not only must we be content to part with a character for wit and ability, rather than gain it by words more entertaining than innocent ; but we must learn to speak considerately and discreetly, checking all idle conversation, which is folly and tends to sin, and even in mirth remembering whose we are, and whom we serve.

Thirdly, we should endeavour to make our conversation useful. By our words, as well as our actions, we should do good, as well as ab-

* Matt., xii., 35.

stain from evil. To conciliate the affections, to increase the knowledge, to correct the faults, to encourage the virtues, to alleviate the sorrows, or even to amuse the cares, of our fellow-creatures, are worthy employments of the faculty of speech: but still more so, to spread the knowledge of religion, to honour God and benefit the souls of men, and in the Christian meekness and unfeigned piety of our conversation so to "let our light shine before men, that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father which is in heaven." To be extensively useful in this way, indeed, requires not only right intentions, but also considerable tact and certain personal endowments. But all, even the most bashful and slow of speech, have it in their power to do some good by purifying and improving the tone of conversation, turning a deaf ear to words of vice and folly, and taking care that their words are innocent at least, if not profitable. A willing heart is ever on the watch for opportunities, and can do much with little means.

But lastly, sins of the tongue are not to be overcome, but by daily and earnest prayer. God's grace it is, which must prevent, accom-

pany, and give success to our endeavours. To labour without this, is to labour in vain. And therefore David, who one while exhorts to the use of our own efforts, "Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile;"* at another makes his earnest prayer to God, "Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of our lips."† So let it be with us. Let prayer and watchfulness go hand in hand; self-control and entire dependence upon God. And in His strength let us bridle our tongue, lest we deceive our own hearts, and our religion be found at last to be vain.

And if we need encouragement in our task, let us bear in mind, dear brethren, that our tongues have a noble destiny. They will not, when this brief life is over, rest for ever voiceless in the grave. With our bodies we shall rise again; and unless we forfeit here our glorious inheritance, shall swell with our notes of praise the everlasting anthems of the blessed. Let us not then profane our "glory" with the words of sin. Rather let us anticipate here the strains of heaven: and remembering that "here have we no continuing city, but seek one to come, by

* Ps. xxxiv., 13.

† Ps. cxli., 3.

Jesus Christ let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.”*

* Heb., xiii., 14, 15.

SINS OF OMISSION.

MATTHEW, XXV., 26, 27.

His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servaht, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury.

ALL sin is disobedience to God's will, made known to us either by the dictates of conscience, or more fully by His revealed word. His commands, thus declared to us, are of two kinds: they either forbid us to do what is displeasing to Him; or enjoin us to do what is pleasing to Him. Disobedience to either of these alike is sin: and hence sins also admit of two divisions; sins of commission, or the doing

what we ought not to do ; and sins of omission, or the leaving undone what we ought to do. But though these two classes of sins are alike sinful, being equally disobedience to God's revealed will, yet they do not receive from us an equal share of attention. • And the reason is obvious. Sins of commission have something positive in them, run clearly and intelligibly counter to the commandment, are sometimes discernible even by the senses, and generally strike a sensible blow upon the conscience. There is something actually done : and the obliquity of the action may be measured by the standard of the divine law. But sins of omission are negative, and escape the observation. There is nothing *done*, which rouses the attention or startles the conscience. The careless, and those who are unaccustomed to watch their own hearts narrowly, are ignorant of them altogether : and even the serious and earnest are often deceived by the stealthy step of these unobtrusive foes. It may be remarked, too, that human laws seldom take cognizance of faults of omission. Their office is to prevent crime, the actual commission, that is, of offences ; and having done this they are generally satisfied. And men

transfer their notions imperceptibly from human laws to divine : and because those are usually accounted good citizens and loyal subjects who break none of the ordinances of a state, although they may make no personal sacrifice for its advantage ; so they are satisfied, that they are obeying God if they do not directly violate His commandments, although they may leave undone much which it is their duty to do. Thus it is, that many pass through life, unaccused of any serious offence, respected by their fellow-men, not dissatisfied with themselves, who are yet guilty daily of a large amount of sin. They are regular, decent, and honest. They neither swear nor lie, break the sabbath, nor defraud or defame their neighbours. They are chaste and temperate, good-natured perhaps, and free from any excess of pride or self-conceit. So far is well. But their sins are sins of omission. They do not love God, nor fear Him, nor seek His honour and glory, nor pray to Him, nor study His word, nor value and improve His sacraments. They do not love their brethren for His sake, nor give alms to the poor, nor comfort the distressed, nor instruct the ignorant, nor send the Gospel to the heathen, nor employ their

influence and example to promote the welfare of others. Or if they do some of these duties, they neglect others ; and are therefore guilty of sins of omission, probably without being conscious of their existence, or setting little weight upon them, if they are.

Give me your attention then, my brethren, as we proceed to observe the light in which sins of omission are exhibited in Scripture ; and then to particularise some of this class of sins into which we may be most in danger of falling.

The well-known parable, from which I have taken the text, clearly teaches us the sinfulness of sins of omission in the sight of God. The lord, travelling into a far country, had entrusted to one of his servants " five talents, to another two, and to another one, to every man according to his several ability." Two of them, having each doubled his talents by trading, were rewarded by their lord's praise on his return ; " Well done, good and faithful servant : thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things ; enter thou into the joy of thy lord." The third servant, meanwhile, had not misspent his talent on any positive sin : he had not squandered it in riotous living ; nor

even lost it by mismanagement or neglect. He had simply not used it. He “went and hid his talent in the earth;” and had it, but nothing more, to bring back to his master. He made his fault worse indeed by his false and unjust excuse: “Lord, I knew thee, that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: and I was afraid.” But the only use his master made of this speech was to convict him by it out of his own mouth: and to show him, that, had this been his lord’s character, which it was not, this should only have made him more careful to turn his talent to the best advantage. “Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into utter darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Such was our Lord’s estimate of a sin, which after all was but a sin of omission. A still more awful proof of the sinfulness of such offences in His sight is furnished by the same chapter. In it our Saviour has been pleased to reveal to us a

glimpse, as it were, of the proceedings on the judgment day; and to tell us, that "when the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all His holy angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory; and before Him shall be gathered all nations: and He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats; and He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on His left." And while He addresses those on the right hand, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;" He will say to those on the left, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." And who are these wretched men, driven out from the presence of God to dwell with wickedness and misery for ever? What is their offence? Are they blasphemers, adulterers, drunkards, or extortioners? Listen to the voice of the Judge: "For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick and in prison, and ye visited me not." For "inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye

did it not unto me." Their sins were sins of omission: and for sins of omission, they "went away into everlasting punishment."

No more can be required to prove the serious character of these sins. But a glance at our Lord's life, and that of His apostles, will show that a Christian's obedience is not intended to be a mere freedom from sins of commission. Our blessed Saviour did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth. But He was a pattern of active, as well as of passive virtues. He "went about doing good."* His "meat was to do the will of Him that sent Him, and to finish His work."† His ministry was one continued series of acts of mercy to the bodies and souls of men; or, when He withdrew Himself for a time from active life, it was to spend whole nights in prayer and communing with God. And His Apostles walked in His steps. It was not merely negative obedience, which left all and followed Him; which resigned ease, and home, to preach the riches of the Gospel of Christ; which cheerfully underwent labour, persecution, martyrdom, that God might be glorified and His kingdom enlarged. "Be ye followers of me," said one of them,

* Acts, x., 38.

† John, iv., 34.

“even as I also am of Christ :”* but what likeness do those bear to their Lord, or to His apostles, who, content with a mere abstinence from positive sins, know nothing of the active duties of which their life was composed?

Such then are sins of omission in the sight of God; condemned already by the example of our Lord and His teaching, and to be the grounds of condemnation at the day of judgment. Surely, then, dear brethren, we should seriously and carefully examine into the existence of such sins in ourselves; and the rather, as by their very nature they are not obvious, but are likely without self-examination to escape the notice of conscience, while they poison the very life of our souls.

The following observations can be considered only as partial aids to an inquiry, the objects of which are as numerous as are a Christian's duties under all the various circumstances of life. Sins of omission may be considered with reference both to our duties towards God, and our duties towards our fellow-creatures.

If we turn to our relations towards God, the first duty we owe to Him involves a sin of omis-

* 1 Cor., xi., 1.

sion scarcely less common than it is important. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God," said our Lord, repeating and enforcing a command of the old covenant, "with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment."* And yet how many well-meaning and respectable people know nothing of this love, which is the sum and substance of all religion! How many, who are in earnest to serve God and save their souls alive, have but a weak, trembling spark of love in their hearts; and suffer the rising flame to be smothered by too much carefulness about the things of this life! I will not ask you now to seek for affections *wholly* weaned from earth, and glowing with heavenly ardour—a precious gift, which God vouchsafes but to some few according to the good pleasure of His will. But do we love Him so much, that we dread to do anything to displease Him, that we desire to know His will and do it, and delight to commune with Him in prayer, in His word, in His sacraments? Have we any desire "to depart and be with Christ, which is far better?"† Or are we even resigned, and ready to break the ties of earth at His bid-

* Matt., xxii., 37, 38. † Philip., i., 23.

ding, and without a murmur or disobedient thought to give up our spirits into the hand of our Father and Friend? Can we, looking upon our daily feelings, motives, and lives, say sincerely and unreservedly, that we have chosen God for our portion, have laid up our treasure in heaven, and that where our treasure is, there is our heart also? Such ought at least to be our love and its effects: and if we have it not, we have a sin of omission to confess, repent, and amend, with fervent prayer for the Spirit of love and grace.

To fear God, again, is another duty; the beginning, or foundation of wisdom.* In this the first Christians “walked, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost;” † and we, like them, are to “perfect holiness in the fear of God.” ‡ Do we do so? Are we impressed with an abiding sense of His presence, a feeling that His eye is ever on us, and that “in Him we live and move and have our being?” § Are His holiness, justice, and truth, habitual convictions of our minds; and do we therefore walk circumspectly before Him, dreading to offend Him, and above all

* Ps. cxi., 10.

† 2 Cor., vii., 1.

‡ Acts, ix., 31.

§ Acts, xvii., 28.

things seeking to approve ourselves in His sight? Let us put these questions also seriously to ourselves; recollecting that the apostolic exhortation is made to us: "Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire."*

To descend somewhat more to particulars. Prayer,—have we no sins of omission to repent on this head? The duty is so repeatedly enforced both by our Lord's precept and example, that all Christians must admit it. Yet how many neglect the assembling themselves together for public worship! How many, who do go to the house of God, go but from habit, or chiefly to hear the sermon, and think little of the prayers! How many prove this, by coming late, and by irreverent postures and evident inattention, when there! And how distracted are our prayers, how cold and spiritless! Worldly and even wicked thoughts creep in where God should be; and that, not altogether from human infirmity, but from want of care, serious preparation and self-control. And if we turn from

* Heb., xii., 27—29.

the church to the closet, must we not say (strange as the words may sound), that there are many Christians who seldom pray at all? Others use prayer as a form, and feel it as a burden: they are wearied with the length of their devotions, apt to hurry them over, glad of an excuse to omit them altogether. Few there are, who have not occasion to mourn over coldness of heart, wandering thoughts, and the want of a devotional spirit. And fewer still who realise the injunctions of God's word "to continue instant in prayer;" * and to "pray without ceasing:" † who pray, that is, often and earnestly, and live always in a prayerful frame of mind.

Another sin of omission is the neglect of God's word. In an age of reading, the Bible is little read. Multitudes never search the Scriptures. Many more find it a weariness, and prefer to gain their knowledge even of spiritual things from the works of human authors. Others, again, read formally, without meditation, prayer, and application of its truths to themselves; and consequently without relish and without profit. My brethren, this cannot be right. Even without a command it must

* Rom., xii., 12.

† 1 Thess., v., 17.

be our duty to study reverently, carefully and devoutly, the revelation of God's will which He has vouchsafed us. It must be a sin to neglect the treasures of heavenly wisdom, which His love has disclosed to us. And the sin becomes more sinful, because it is disobedience to Him, who has said, "Search the Scriptures; they are they which testify of me."* Let us never think ourselves clear of a sin of omission on this head, till we can sincerely affirm somewhat in David's spirit: "Thy testimonies are my meditation. How sweet are Thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through Thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way."†

Another source of sins of omission is neglect of the Sacraments. Of the one, indeed, we have already been made partakers; but it is our duty, on the one hand, to realise and be thankful for our privileges in it; that we have been born again of water and the Spirit; that we have been baptized into Christ's body; that we have been buried with Him in baptism; that by Him we have been made children of God, and consequently, inheritors of the kingdom of heaven:

* John, v., 39. † Ps. cxix., 99, 103, 104.

and on the other, never to forget the solemn promise and profession we then made, and without performing which we despise our birthright and lose the blessing; that we are vowed soul and body to God; that we are His sworn soldiers, bound to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil, pledged to believe His promises, and obediently to keep His commandments unto our life's end.

Of the other sacrament what shall we say: On the night before He suffered for our sins, our Lord made it His last command: "Do this in remembrance of Me;"* and to its right performance He attached many spiritual blessings. And yet multitudes who bear His name, never communicate in His Supper at all: others go rarely, and, in truth, unwillingly: and others neglect the due and fitting preparation of the heart. All alike have disobeyed Christ, and left undone what they ought to have done.

Such are some of our sins of omission in our duties towards God. Our duties towards our fellow-creatures would furnish us with matter for much self-examination. But a few words at present must suffice on this head. Of the love

* Luke, xxii., 19.

of our neighbour, and the general failure of fulfilling it, we have had several occasions of speaking before.

The prevalence of sins of pride and vanity, of anger, uncharitableness, and an unforgiving spirit, show too plainly that we do not love our neighbour as ourselves. And when such feelings are wanting, how much indifference there is towards the wants and welfare of others ! The very *sentiment* of brotherly love is well-nigh extinguished in many breasts by the influence of selfishness and pride.

But further, we are to “love,” we must remember, “not in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”* Let us ask ourselves, therefore, whether we do as much good to others as we might ? God has purposely placed the temporal and eternal interests of His creatures in some degree in each other’s hands, not only to try their patience, faith, and perseverance, but also to give us an opportunity of imitating Him, by doing good both to the souls and bodies of our brethren. There are the poor to be assisted with food and clothing, the sick to be visited, the ignorant to be instructed, provision

* 1 John, iii., 18.

to be made for the worship of God, and the preaching of His word in our own land, as well as for sending His Gospel to our countrymen abroad and to the heathen: duties these, worthy the efforts of those who desire to follow the Lord Jesus: and duties which not only will be rewarded by God's free mercy for our Saviour's sake, but the neglect of which will, we have seen, condemn us at the judgment-day. The mode, indeed, in which they are to be performed by each, and the measure, will vary with the circumstances of age, place, rank, ability, health, and the like: but let us candidly put the question to ourselves, whether we, under all such circumstances, are doing as much as we can, or ought? Are we practising self-denial in doing good; and making sacrifices of our money, pleasures, time and ease, to the benefit of our brethren?

But besides our alms, our influence is to be employed for the benefit of others. Are we careful to throw it wholly into the scale of religion and virtue? Do we endeavour to bring others into the path we would tread ourselves,—our relations, our servants, our friends? Whatever may be a man's station, *if he is in earnest,*

his personal influence must have weight ; and we therefore omit a duty, if we do not exert this influence aright. The most powerful part, however, of influence is example : and we must not neglect to inquire of ourselves, whether we have turned this talent to the best account. If our example has been such as to lead others into sin, we are guilty of a sin of commission : if it has not been such as to lead and encourage them in the ways of well-doing, we are guilty of a sin of omission. The question must be answered by our own consciences.

These remarks may serve in some degree to show us, how vastly sins of omission must swell the account of our offences against God. By creation and by the purchase of Christ's blood we are wholly His ; and our whole service, both of body and soul, is justly due to Him. If we had done all that is commanded us, we should be "unprofitable servants." Whenever, therefore, we do less, we must be sinful servants. Let us view our bygone lives, dear brethren, in this light ; and in the numberless omissions we perceive in them, let us learn to know our sinfulness, and humbly and sorrowfully to deplore it before God. Let it be our sincere con-

fession,—the very voice of our heart,—“We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and there is no health in us.” And in faith let us plead the perfect obedience of Him who is alone our Righteousness, that His merits may be accepted for our unworthiness, and that we may be pardoned and restored through Him.

And with this repentance, or rather as part of this repentance, let us steadfastly purpose to lead henceforth a life of more active, careful obedience; endeavouring by God’s grace to supply the omissions which self-examination has detected, “pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus,”* and aiming at that glorious end proposed by Christ Himself, “Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”†

In carrying out this holy purpose it will be necessary, first, to search the Scriptures, that we may know “what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.”‡ Sins of omission often arise from ignorance: but it is a wilful ignorance, for God has revealed His will to us. Let us take His word, then, as our daily

* Philip., iii., 14. † Matt., v., 48. ‡ Rom., xii., 2.

monitor, our adviser and guide. It will instruct us in our duties, which are God's ways ; and amidst all the darkness with which our ignorance, our indolence, and our passions encompass us, will be a "lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path."*

Secondly, we must firmly resolve, whatever we find to be God's will to do it. As He is holy, and we corrupt and sinful, it cannot be but that His commands will often be displeasing to flesh and blood. And thus much, indeed, we are plainly forewarned of it. For though, in the end, the ways of heavenly wisdom will be found ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace, yet to walk in them, we must take up our cross and follow Jesus ; we must deny ourselves ; we must unsparingly cut off every sin, though it be to us as a right hand or a right eye. And this will require not resolution merely, but watchfulness. When Satan cannot persuade us to wilful disobedience, he deceives us with false excuses : and if we listen to him, he will find abundant reasons why we should leave undone each unwelcome duty, which conscience has learnt from the word of God we ought to do.

* Ps. cxix., 104.

Let us, then, dear brethren, having counted the cost, aim at a simple, self-denying conformity to God's will, that "not being forgetful hearers" only, "but doers of the work," by Him we may be "blessed in our deed."*

And lastly, let us pray more and more earnestly for the grace of the Holy Spirit. This is the beginning, the continuance, and the ending of all repentance and amendment. With reference to the class of sins before us, we must pray for light to discover our omissions, for grace to mourn for them, for guidance and strength to supply them. We must learn from David the petitions which rose from a willing, but humble heart, so readily to his lips: "Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes; and I shall keep it unto the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep Thy law: yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart. Make me to go in the path of Thy commandments: for therein do I delight. Let my heart be sound in Thy statutes, that I be not ashamed."†

You will observe, my brethren, that the sins which have formed the subject of our meditations this Lent, are for the most part such as are

* Jam., i., 25.

† Ps. cxix., 33—35, 80.

little regarded by the world. Sins of the temper, of pride and vanity, of the thoughts, of the tongue, and still less sins of omission, except in their more aggravated forms, are scarcely noticed by human codes of morality. We have seen, that tried by the touchstone of revelation, and in the eye of God, they are sins, staining the soul with guilt, and written in the book of recording justice to witness against us at the day of judgment. And every sin, we must bear in mind, is not only ruinous to the soul, but disobedience to our Creator, rebellion against our King, aggravated ingratitude to our Benefactor, Father, and Redeemer, and the faithless breach of our own solemn and repeated vows.

Two reflections are, therefore, forced upon us by the review of the whole subject.

First, how deep, how extensive is man's sinfulness! The world's wickedness is a proverb in the world; and few pass through life without daily increasing experience of its truth. But the sins we have been considering are over and above all this. They are found where the world finds none. They are the darkness of its sunshine, the bitterness of its sweets, the rottenness of its fairest fruits. They lead us into the heart; and

show us, that besides the vices that corrupt, and the crimes that disgrace the outward form of society, the taint of sin extends to the very core; and that it is true of each child of Adam, as it was of God's people in the prophet's day, "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores."* Surely this thought, dear brethren, should humble us indeed. Surely it should infuse in us the bitterness of self-condemnation, the earnestness of true repentance. Surely our confession should be that of the convinced and sorrowing patriarch, "Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."†

But when we turn from man to God, how does the view we have taken of our sinfulness magnify His exceeding mercy! Disobedient are we, yet He pitied us; rebellious, yet He visited us; ungrateful, yet His Son has died for us; corrupt and sin-stained, even to the hidden recesses of the heart, yet for us, His ruined, fallen creatures, the whole Godhead has interposed; the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in mysterious

* Isaiah, i., 5, 6.

† Job, xlii., 6.

union, have wrought out for us a miracle of salvation. Where sin has abounded, grace still more abounds. God's mercy is greater than the greatness of our corruption. Our iniquities are all but infinite; but He *is* infinite who died for them. Deep as is the stain of our guilt, yet "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin."* Who can worthily "praise the Lord for His goodness, or for His wonderful works to the children of men?"† Not men, nor angels, nor the myriad voices of the host of heaven. Hereafter, dear brethren, we may raise a fitter strain, if by faith and patient continuance in well-doing "we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end."‡ Meanwhile let us remember, that the most acceptable return we can make to our God is to embrace the salvation which His love has provided. He willeth not the death of a sinner, but that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth: and in the repentance, faith, and holiness of those for whom He died, the Saviour "sees of the travail of His soul, and is satisfied." Let such be our oblations then, my brethren, such our thanksgiving. Let our

* 1 John, i., 7. † Ps. cvii., 8. ‡ Heb., iii., 6

offering be a contrite heart. Let the prayer of faith rise up as incense to His throne. Let our daily anthems be the increasing purity, charity, and godliness of our lives; and let us henceforth present and dedicate ourselves, our souls and bodies, “a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service.”*

* Rom., xii., 1.

THE END.

London :

F. Shoberl, Printer, 37, Dean Street, Soho, W.



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